Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. 1 (THEN)
3. 2 (THEN)
4. 3 (NOW)
5. 4 (THEN)
6. 5 (THEN)
7. 6 (NOW)
8. 7 (THEN)
9. 8 (THEN)
10. 9 (NOW)
11. 10 (THEN)
12. 11 (THEN)
13. 12 (NOW)
14. 13 (THEN)
15. 14 (THEN)
16. 15 (NOW)
17. 16 (THEN)
18. 17 (THEN)
19. 18 (NOW)
20. 19 (THEN)
21. 20 (THEN)
22. 21 (NOW)
23. 22 (THEN)
24. 23 (THEN)
25. 24 (NOW)
26. 25 (THEN)
27. 26 (THEN)
28. 27 (NOW)
29. 28 (THEN)
30. 29 (THEN)
31. 30 (NOW)
32. Frostwing
33. 31 (THEN)
34. 32 (NOW)

35. 33 (THEN)
36. 34 (NOW)
37. 35 (THEN)
38. 36 (NOW)
39. 37 (NOW)
40. 38 (THEN)
41. 39 (NOW)
42. 40 (THEN)
43. 41 (NOW)
44. 42 (THEN)
45. Epilogue

Allegiances

This book contains spoilers for A Light in the Mist, Omen of the Stars.

ThunderClan

Leader Amberstar- Calico she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy Fogpetal- Pale gray-and-white she-cat with light blue eyes

Medicine Cat Thorndawn- golden brown tabby tom with white paws and yellow eyes
Apprentice Poppystream- Dark ginger she-cat with a bushy tail and sky-blue eyes

Warriors

Ashdream- Dark gray tabby she-cat with black stripes and light blue eyes

Softwhisper- Gray-and-white she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice Leopardpaw- Spotted yellow she-cat with pale green eyes

Darkthorn- Black tom with dark blue eyes

Sootwisp- Gray-black tom with amber eyes

Dawnbreeze- Creamy gold she-cat with yellow eyes

Gingerstrike- Orange tabby tom with a white-tipped tail and yellow

eyes

Firespark- Orange tabby tom with forest green eyes

Tigerstripe- Dark brown tom with a white underbelly and yellow eyes

Apprentice Violetpaw- Spotted brown-and-white she-cat with dark green eyes

Cloudclaw- Long-haired white tom with sky-blue eyes

Whitefire- Sleek white tom with orange eyes

Sunspirit- Pale ginger-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Rainclaw- Light gray tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Queens

Moonpelt- Silver-gray she-cat with light blue eyes (Mother of Firespark's kits: Orangekit (dark ginger tom with white ears and amber eyes) and Palekit (white she-kit with one gray paw and blue eyes)

Tawnystep- Dappled golden she-cat with yellow eyes (Expecting Tigerstripe's kits)

Emberpelt- Dark gray she-cat with amber eyes (Expecting Cloudclaw's kits)

Elders

Speckledpatch- dark tortoiseshell she-cat with light green eyes

Mistystream- Pale gray she-cat with misty blue eyes, poor vision

ShadowClan

Leader Mudstar- Brown tom with black patches and yellow eyes

Deputy Cherrycloud- Cream-and-ginger she-cat with sky-blue eyes

Medicine Cat Silverlight- Silver-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors

Gingershadow- Dark ginger she-cat with lighter points and amber eyes

Hazelfang- Dark gray-and-white she-cat with light green eyes
Apprentice Nightpaw- Black she-cat with ice-blue eyes

Poppysong- Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes
Apprentice Cinderpaw- pale gray tabby tom with orange eyes

Blackheart- Black tom with big white paws and dark green eyes

Ashtail- Dark gray tabby tom with sky-blue eyes

Slatepetal- Spotted gray she-cat with white ears and pale blue eyes
Apprentice Snowpaw- skinny white tom with yellow eyes

Copperheart- Dark ginger she-cat with dark green eyes

Goldpelt- Golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Bluefrost- Silverish she-cat with light blue eyes

Silkclaw- Long-haired gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Cedartail- Pale brown tom with darker stripes and amber eyes

Blazemist- Ginger-and-white tom with orange eyes
Apprentice Frostpaw- white she-cat with leaf-green eyes

Patchleaf- Black-and-white tom with dark green eyes

Flamestripe- Orange tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Queens

Honeyshine- Yellow-and-white she-cat with amber eyes (Mother to Cedartail's kits: Barkkit (dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes), Brightkit (tawny she-kit with amber eyes) and Coldkit (white tom

with brown legs and blue eyes)

Elders

Mistsand- Blue-gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Silversong- Silver she-cat with light blue eyes

Oakshadow- Black tom with amber eyes

WindClan

Leader Hawkstar- light brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy Wolfwind- Silver-and-black tabby tom with ice-blue eyes

Medicine Cat Honeyshadow- Ginger-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice Mistpaw- Pale gray tabby she-cat with light green eyes

Warriors

Hazelspark- Gray and brown she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice Marblepaw- Dappled tortoiseshell tom with emerald green eyes

Feathersong- Fluffy gray she-cat with blue eyes

Frostshade- White she-cat with pale blue eyes

Apprentice Rockpaw- Black tom with pale blue eyes

Blackshade- Black-and-gray tom with green eyes

Daisyfrost- Calico she-cat with very light blue eyes

Sunwisp- Bright ginger tom with orange eyes

Violetdust- black-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Brambleshadow- Spotted dark brown tom with yellow eyes

Silentwhisker- Mottled gray tom with yellow eyes

Lilyfang- Pale gray tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Chestnutstripe- Dark brown tom with a black-tipped tail and amber eyes

Pebblestrike- Flecked gray tom with light green eyes

Redclaw- Orange tabby tom with amber eyes

Flamepounce- pale ginger she-cat with dark green eyes

Queens

Emberstorm- Dark gray she-cat with pale green eyes (Expecting Sunwisp's kits)

Elders

Skystorm- dark blue-gray tom with sky-blue eyes

Shadefang- mottled brown-and-gray tom with amber eyes

RiverClan

Leader Oakstar- Mottled brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy Wolfstorm- Gray-black tom with dark green eyes

Medicine Cat Coalfeather- black tom with yellow eyes

Warriors

Smokepetal- dark gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Carpfur- Yellow tabby tom with bright green eyes

Gingertail- pale ginger she-cat with a brown tail and amber eyes

Beewisp- white she-cat with golden paws and pale green eyes

Apprentice Cedarpaw- dark gray tabby tom with light green eyes

Lionclaw- Golden tabby tom with yellow eyes

Jaggedglow- black tom with white toes and yellow eyes

Snowdust- white she-cat with sky-blue eyes

Softshade- pale gray-and-white she-cat with light blue eyes

Eelthorn- black-and-brown tom with amber eyes

Rainscar- dappled gray tom with dark green eyes

Shadefur- dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Ravenstorm- black tom with dark blue eyes

Amberbreeze- dark ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Rustbreeze- dark ginger tabby tom with a white-tipped tail and dark green eyes

Blueshine- light blue-gray she-cat with pale blue eyes

Queens

Sagesky- pale gray tabby she-cat with dark green eyes (Mother to Eelthorn's kits: Cloudkit (fluffy white she-kit with bright blue eyes), Troutkit (pale gray tabby tom with light green eyes), Minnowkit (black-and-brown tom with amber eyes)

Elders

Nightbranch- black tom with leaf-green eyes

Batear's Camp

Batear- big black-and-white tom with pale green eyes, formerly of ShadowClan

Fenneldust- light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, formerly

ThunderClan

Shred- young dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Tear- small gray-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Rip- black tom with silver-striped legs and light blue eyes

Flea- gray-and-brown tom with amber eyes

Ragespirit- dark gray-black tabby tom with a white-tipped tail and bright green eye

Moose- black she-cat with ice-blue eyes and a white spot on her belly

Whisperear- light gray-brown tom with emerald green eyes; formerly ThunderClan

1 (THEN)

"Great StarClan, Snowpaw! That rabbit could have fed half the Clan, and you lost it?" Slatepetal lashed her tail, glaring at Snowpaw. He shuffled his paws nervously, cowering beneath her. "I'm sorry! I was just so hungry I couldn't think straight..." He blinked miserably at the spotted she-cat.

Slatepetal let out a long breath. "Snowpaw, we all are! This is leaf-bare, but it also means that we have to work twice as hard. Honeyshine has three young kits, and Patchleaf and Flamestripe have fallen ill. Do you know what it means? We have three less warriors to help take care of the Clan. So Snowpaw, you and your littermates are going to be the future of ShadowClan. If you can't catch a simple rabbit, who is going to be at loss here?" Slatepetal's pale blue eyes were blazing with fury.

"Calm down, Slatepetal. No cat's perfect, you know. And you have lost prey before, too." Blazemist padded up. Slatepetal glared at the ginger-and-white tom. "That's the reason why I want Snowpaw to learn from my mistakes! I'm going to train him until he's close to perfect. Look at Frostpaw- she has much more prey than you, Snowpaw!"

His heart sank further when Frostpaw struggled into view, an enormous squirrel half her size dangling from her jaws. "The two mice are mine, too," she declared proudly, not noticing Snowpaw's envy. At his own paws were two scrawny blackbirds, pale in comparison to his sister.

Blazemist put down the two mice and eyed Snowpaw sympathetically. "It's true," the orange-eyed tom admitted, gazing fondly at his apprentice. Frostpaw puffed out her chest, and Snowpaw shrank back into his pelt.

Slatepetal took a deep breath. "Let's just get back to camp; it's getting late. Snowpaw, I'd better see improvements tomorrow." "Okay..." Snowpaw's voice was timid.

Back at camp, the other two apprentices, Cinderpaw and Nightpaw, called out to him and Frostpaw. "Hey, over here!"

Frostpaw bounded eagerly toward them, while Snowpaw trudged behind her. "Snowpaw, what's the matter?" Cinderpaw inquired, clearly concerned for his friend. Snowpaw heaved a massive sigh as he sat down beside the pale gray tabby tom. "I missed a rabbit, and Slatepetal's fuming."

Nightpaw glanced briefly at the spotted gray she-cat, who was stalking into the warriors' den, her tail lashing. "Well, I can see that," she meowed drily. "But what exactly happened?"

Snowpaw ducked his head, recalling the accident. "Well... I saw it's hind legs and... sort of... well, I was worried that it would scratch my eye, like what happened to Goldpelt!" The golden tabby tom's eye had been scratched by a hare two moons ago, and it was thanks to Silverlight who had managed to save his sight.

For a heartbeat there was silence. Then Nightpaw burst out laughing, and the others joined in, chortling. Snowpaw wished that he could hide, giving his chest fur multiple licks. "Seriously, Snowpaw? I knew you weren't the most courageous, but you were scared of prey?" Cinderpaw guffawed, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Well, at least I won't lose my sight!" Snowpaw defended himself, deeply hurt. Frostpaw's leaf-green eyes glimmered with mirth as she flicked his shoulder with her tail. "At this rate, you won't be a warrior! You would be a mouse!"

The group of apprentices dissolved into laughter again and Snowpaw felt his ears burning with humiliation. "Well, easy for you three to say! You all are wonderful role models- at least to Slatepetal. And what am I, huh? A disappointment!" He got to his paws and raced to the apprentices' den, his fur bushed up. *So what if I'm scared of a rabbit? Fear might protect me one day!*

But as he recalled the days in the nursery, he realised that he had always been timid, snuggled up to Gingershadow's belly while Frostpaw played with the older kits. When invited to join them,

Snowpaw had always tried to escape, coming up with excuses like, "I was just going to my nest" or "I have a bellyache".

Perhaps it was the loss of his father, Coldheart, that haunted him. The long-haired white tom had been the deputy of ShadowClan before drowning while saving Snowpaw when he was barely a moon old, and Snowpaw had been a coward since.

2 (THEN)

"Hey, Snowpaw." Nightpaw kneaded the soft moss of her nest with her front paws, her ice-blue eyes full of curiosity. "Just to know, what's your greatest ambition?"

Snowpaw ducked his head. "To be Clan leader, of course! I would lead ShadowClan into the world of greatness, and we'll conquer all the Clans!" He puffed out his chest, fantasising about what he would do. "ShadowClan would be the strongest!"

But his imagination made an abrupt halt when he saw that Nightpaw was staring at him with a skeptical expression. "No offense, Snowpaw. But if you're going to be the leader you hope you can become, you have to be courageous! Coldheart, your father, was like, the fiercest deputy in moons- according to the elders, that is. But you're a little... off."

Although Snowpaw could tell that Nightpaw didn't mean to hurt his feelings, his fur still bristled. "Fear will keep me alert! Like, if I hadn't been careful about the rabbit, I might be in Silverlight's den right now, blind. How would you feel if that happened?"

Without giving the black apprentice a chance to respond, Snowpaw curled into his nest, shuddering at the 'terrifying' experience with the rabbit. He imagined the claws flashing across his eyes, the terrible darkness as he lost his sight... Oh, what a horrible thought!

Nightpaw simply snorted as she too lay down. I sure hope that Snowpaw either grows out of his fantasy, or he actually toughens up. And it'd better be the second option.

***

Sunlight filtered through the den walls, and Snowpaw blinked his eyes open, relishing the warmth for a moment before stretching as he got out of his nest.

"Wake up, you two! We're going to mark the ThunderClan border." Slatepetal poked her head inside. "Good morning, Snowpaw. Wake Cinderpaw, will you? And be quick about it- the patrol is waiting."

"Okay." Snowpaw gave a small nod before creeping up to his denmate's nest and jabbing a paw into Cinderpaw's side. The pale gray tabby tom jerked awake, his paws flailing, and Snowpaw jumped out of the way and crouched in a corner, his pelt bristling and his yellow eyes wide with fear. "I'm sorry! Don't hurt me..." he whimpered.

Cinderpaw blinked his sleep-filled eyes and hopped out of the nest, padding over to Snowpaw, who cowered under his shadow. But the older apprentice touched his nose to Snowpaw's forehead. "Calm down, Snowpaw. I would never hurt you on purpose,"he attempted to comfort the skinny white tom.

Snowpaw flattened his ears. "But on accident?"

Cinderpaw rolled his eyes. "Let's go already, Snowpaw. You don't want to keep Slatepetal waiting, do you?" "No!" Forgetting about his fear of being injured by Cinderpaw, Snowpaw darted outside, shivering in the chilly air.

Their mentors, Poppysong and Slatepetal, were deep in conversation when the apprentices scurried over. "About time." Slatepetal got to her paws, arching her back in a long stretch. "ThunderClan must have stolen all our prey by now."

Snowpaw mistook her gently scolding tone for an accusing one, and let out a yelp. "I'm sorry, Slatepetal!"

Poppysong and his mentor exchanged glances, with Slatepetal heaving an exasperated sigh. "I take it as he is often like that?" Poppysong questioned dryly, with a glance at Snowpaw. "Always," Slatepetal responded, twitching an ear.

"Poppysong, can I eat? The mention of prey made me hungry." Cinderpaw wound around his mentor's paws, his tail rippling in the air. "No. You can do so when we come back. Come on, let's go now," the tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat told him, then led the way out of

camp. "Mentors!" Cinderpaw huffed.

Snowpaw gave the pale gray tabby apprentice a sideways look. "Won't she reprimand you for being so bold?" 'What, Poppysong? Nah. Every cat knows that she has a soft spot for young cats." Cinderpaw meowed carelessly, not seeing Snowpaw's yellow eyes widen with shock. "Slatepetal would claw my ears off!"

"Yes, I would. Because if I didn't, you apprentices would be taking all the prey from our elders and queens." Slatepetal's sharp ears caught Snowpaw's words, and the spotted gray she-cat glared at the two apprentices from over her shoulder, then at Poppysong. "You know, I think you're too soft with Cinderpaw."

The older warrior flicked her tail over Slatepetal's shoulder. "In fact, Slatepetal, I think apprentices work better if you were more lenient with them. And please remember that I'm older than you." "Oh, I remember. I'm not as forgetful as Silversong yet!" Slatepetal purred.

Cinderpaw let out a long breath. "Wow, that's tough. I'm starting to understand the why you're the way you are- kind of. But if I were you, I still wouldn't be so mouse-hearted."

"I mean, you aren't me. But fear is needed in our lives...right?"

The older apprentice didn't reply.

3 (NOW)

Snowtuft watched through slitted eyes from a corner as Darkstripe taught a group of younger Dark Forest members. Letting out a soft growl, he dug his claws into the earth, yawning.

"Bored?" Shredtail, sitting in front of him, didn't even bother to turn his head. "Yeah. Darkstripe is literally the worst cat to be in the Dark Forest- always padding after Tigerstar." Snowtuft huffed, not bothering to lower his voice.

"Always aim for the throat." The dark gray tabby tom was lecturing, and the young Dark Forest cats watched with rounded eyes as Darkstripe grasped a wiry brown tom, hooking his claws into the brown tom's ragged fur and hurling him to the ground, knocking the breath out of him. "See?"

The brown tom struggled helplessly as Darkstripe ran a claw along his throat, leaving a trail of blood. But suddenly, the black-striped tom turned and stared into the fog and blinked. Snowtuft frowned. *What is Darkstripe looking at?*

Hawkfrost padded from the shadows, growling and knocked Darkstripe away from his victim. "Concentrate on what you're doing!" Grabbing the bleeding tom, Hawkfrost shoved him back toward the line of watching cats.

When the brown tom lapped at his wound, Hawkfrost snarled, "Worry about your pelt later!"

Stopping midlick, the tom stared at Hawkfrost fearfully through pale blue eyes, shrinking into his pelt. "You wanted to learn some killing moves! Stop acting like a frightened kit and listen." *A frightened kit.* That had been him many seasons back, when he was still alive. Snowtuft grimaced at the mouse-heart he had been when he was young.

But then Hawkfrost turned to face him, ice-blue eyes glinting in the

eerie light as their gazes locked. Snowtuft swallowed, knowing what was next. "Come here, Snowtuft!"

Warily, he crept forward, half expecting the dark brown tabby tom to attack him. "Are you ready to learn?" Hawkfrost sneered, scorn in his voice. *Of course!* Snowtuft nodded. "That's why I'm here," he spat, unsheathing his claws.

"Good." Before Snowtuft had time to react, Hawkfrost lunged and grasped Snowtuft by the throat, lifting him with powerful paws. Snowtuft churned his paws helplessly, gasping at the tightness around his throat and fighting to free himself.

"Shredtail, come here!" Hawkfrost called, his voice thick with menace. The dark brown tabby tom crept forward from the back, his yellow eyes gleaming with blood-hunger. "Slice his belly open." Hawkfrost ordered, and Snowtuft fought harder against his grip though to no avail.

As if increasing the suspense, Shredtail lifted one paw and unsheathed his claws. Snowtuft gulped as he saw the thorn-sharp tips catch the half-light, and he bared his teeth at the dark brown tabby tom.

Quick as a snake, Shredtail drove the paw down, and Snowtuft let out an agonised yowl of pain, his vision clouding with red as blood streamed from his belly. The wound was from his ear to his stomach- a long and deep one.

Hawkfrost finally released him, and Snowtuft collapsed, blood pumping from the injury. He glared at Hawkfrost through hate-filled eyes, hissing at the agony. Hawkfrost's ice-blue eyes gleamed. "You want to fight me, Snowtuft?"

Snowtuft's hackles rose, but the stinging pains from his stomach warned him to have second thoughts. "No. But I will sometime." He growled at the dark brown tabby tom. "Wise, brave words. The mark of a true Dark Forest warrior is already with you, and Shredtail too." Hawkfrost's gaze softened with approval, and he pushed Snowtuft away forcefully. "You and Shredtail may leave now; you have learned well." He praised, and despite his pain, pride

wormed through Snowtuft's mind.

Shredtail came forward to help Snowtuft limp away to another part of the Dark Forest, and both of them sat there. Snowtuft hurriedly packed moss into his belly, wincing at the pain. Shredtail glanced sideways at him. "I guess you'll have the scar." The younger tom almost sounded envious. "Yeah, I guess I will." Snowtuft could not help but feel smug about his new wound- the sign that he had borne the pain and survived.

Shredtail licked his blood-soaked paw. "And I hope that blood will continue drenching his paw," he snarled savagely, his yellow eyes gleaming. "It was really satisfying to cut open flesh." "Well, we will be experiencing that more and more often, I bet!" Snowtuft's tail curled up, and he looked up from his stomach, his own eyes glittering with anticipation.

Shredtail grinned, bumping Snowtuft's side with his. "I can't wait."

4 (THEN)

"Hi, Snowpaw. Slatepetal twisted her ankle this morning, so she asked me to tell you to join patrols for today." Ashtail, Slatepetal's brother, greeted Snowpaw when he came out from his den that morning, a tuft of white fur sticking out from between his ears and shivering from the cold.

"Oh! Is she alright? What happened? Did a rabbit-" Snowpaw was cut off by a chuckle from Ashtail. "Why don't you see her yourself? You can ask Silverlight about her condition." "Oh... alright. But will she scold me for waking up so early? The sun already rose..." Snowpaw babbled on.

"Calm down, Snowpaw!" A rough tongue gave the fur between his ears an affectionate lick, smoothing it down. Snowpaw's shoulders went rigid, and he spun around, his yellow eyes full of terror until he realised who it was. "Gingershadow! You scared me half the way to StarClan!" Snowpaw rubbed against his mother's legs.

Gingershadow laughed and nuzzled her son. "Gather yourself some courage, Snowpaw! I remember that you used to be so adventurous as a young kit-" "Before Coldheart died." Snowpaw whimpered, closing his eyes against the memory.

Gingershadow's amber eyes darkened briefly. "Now, dear. It's not the time to change your entire personality because of one accident! I haven't forgotten Coldheart, but neither have I stayed mourning." She glanced at Ashtail, her amber gaze softening for a heartbeat, an exchange that Snowpaw did not notice.

"Now, just go visit Slatepetal. Afterwards you can go hunting with me and Ashtail. We will hunt near the carrionplace, though." Gingershadow nudged him towards the medicine den. "Okay." Snowpaw pushed through the bramble thicket, his shoulders hunched.

"Good morning, Snowpaw! You want to visit Slatepetal, am I right?"

The ShadowClan medicine cat greeted him warmly, wiping her paws on the stones. Snowpaw nodded shyly. "How is she?"

"Silverlight says that I'm to keep it off for about two days," a voice croaked from the corner of the den. "Slatepetal! What happened? Was it the same rabbit that hurt Goldpelt?" Snowpaw hurried over to the spotted gray she-cat, who let out a long sigh.

"No, Snowpaw. I just caught my paw on a root while chasing a pigeon. The snow made it diffficult to see," Slatepetal explained. "Oh, no! Pidgeons must be so dangerous..." Snowpaw fretted, and his mentor exchanged a look with Sliverlight.

"For StarClan's sake, Snowpaw. Even medicine cats aren't as anxious as that." Silverlight's smile was strained as she wrapped her tail around his shoulder. The silver-and-white she-cat led him out of the den. "Slatepetal needs rest. You can come back at sunhigh or so."

Snowpaw nodded mutely and looked around camp. Where is Gingershadow and Ashtail? He finally caught the two of them in a shadowed corner, talking very closely together. "Hey!" Snowpaw bounded over to them, who leaped apart almost guiltily.

'What were you two talking about?" Snowpaw tipped his head, his eyes darting from she-cat to tom. "Uh, nothing." Gingershadow shifted her paws uncomfortably. "Just talking about the patrol," Ashtail added, giving his chest fur a few quick licks.

"Yeah! We've decided to go to the thick pine cluster instead," Gingershadow piped up, then headed toward the camp entrance. Ashtail quickly followed, catching up with Gingershadow to talk to the she-cat.

"Hey! Can I come with you two?" Frostpaw bounced up to the two warriors, who stared at her. "Where's Blazemist?" Ashtail inquired, his tail-tip twitching while Gingershadow let out a short purr and touched noses with Snowpaw's sister, who eagerly returned the gesture. Snowpaw felt a prick of envy at their easy affection- Gingershadow had always seemed to favour Frostpaw after the accident.

"He wanted to be with Honeyshine instead of training me." Snowpaw immediately knew that the white she-cat was lying. But he held his tongue, not daring to speak up against his sister, who had the best reputation out of all the apprentices, and the best karma. The last time he'd snitched on her, he had awoken to fire ants all over his pelt.

"But-" Ashtail's protest was interrupted by Gingershadow. "Oh, my poor daughter, neglected by a bad mentor. I shall have a word with Blazemist later- he is a young warrior, after all. I'm still surprised that Mudstar didn't choose Ashtail- he's way more capable than Blazemist, and Slatepetal's littermate as well. But come with us- we're going hunting." The ginger she-cat cooed, giving Frostpaw's ear a lick.

Soon, they were off again, with Gingershadow completely forgetting about Snowpaw and chattering with Frostpaw and Ashtail. The snow was deep, and he struggled to walk properly, but nly when they arrived at the pine cluster did the ginger she-cat turn around to face Snowpaw. "I think we should have a competition. We can each decide what the other cat can catch," she suggested, her amber eyes bright. "Good idea!" Frostpaw bumped her side with Gingershadow's, her leaf-green eyes glittering smugly as they caught Snowpaw's yellow ones. He dug his claws into the earth. "Alright," he growled. *Please don't let Frostpaw pick a rabbit or pigeon!* He prayed desperately.

Gingershadow picked mice for Frostpaw, an easy choice. Ashtail picked squirrels for Gingershadow, somehow knowing that the ginger she-cat was one of the best tree climbers in ShadowClan.

"Your turn, Snowpaw! What's your choice for me?" Ashtail's mew was rich. "Erm... rabbits?" Snowpaw suggested tentatively. If the choice is taken, Frostpaw can't choose it again!

Gingershadow rolled her eyes, not unkindly. "Snowpaw, we aren't close to the WindClan border. No rabbits will be here." Snowpaw shrank into his pelt, embarrassed. "Uh, okay. Then, Ashtail-"

But Frostpaw interjected. "Gingershadow, can I choose for Ashtail then? Because Snowpaw might have another... confusion or

something- no offense." Her voice was sickly sweet, and Snowpaw glared at his littermate.

But their mother was a victim to the honey-like tone. "Of course, dear. If Snowpaw doesn't mind." Gingershadow shot Snowpaw a look, and he gritted his teeth. "I don't mind," he lied, knowing that he had sealed his fate. Frostpaw would never accept a 'no' anyway.

"Great! Ashtail, you can hunt... starlings?" Frostpaw took a long time to decide; clearly she hadn't had a prey in mind. "Sure!" Ashtail whisked away into the trees.

"Now, Snowpaw, you can do pigeons!" Frostpaw purred, weaving between her brother and her mother. "No!" Snowpaw knew what she would choose, but still let out a yelp of terror. "Pigeons are dangerous! They might kill me!"

"Snowpaw... you eat pigeons, don't you?" Gingershadow looked at him sternly. Frostpaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "I bet he won't! Ever since Goldpelt's incident, he's never even touched a rabbit! Or caught one."

"Snowpaw! I can't have that. You will go out and catch at least two pigeons before coming back here. Understood?" Gingershadow snarled, her temper giving way. *Who died and made you leader of ShadowClan?*

"Fine! But don't come crying to StarClan if I break a leg because of you!" Snowpaw hissed savagely, half from panic, not caring if he sounded ridiculous.

As he left, he heard the sounds of Frostpaw chortling as she went into the forest, scaring away the prey. *But what does it matter? Mice are like, the easiest to catch! And Frostpaw is an amazing hunter- I can't deny that.* Snowpaw's paws burned with fury, and his heart pounded.

He swallowed, staring into the snow-covered trees, trying to push back his dread. *I'll have to catch pigeons...*

5 (THEN)

"I did it." Snowpaw dragged his prey and flung it in front of Gingershadow, Frostpaw and Ashtail, who stared at the two enormous pidgeons. Frostpaw's jaw dropped. "Great StarClan!" Ashtail breathed, while Gingershadow darted forward to give the two pieces of prey a sniff. "They're fresh," she announced as if it were breaking news.

Frostpaw's leaf-green eyes narrowed. "Are you sure that you caught them yourself? It's leaf-bare -we haven't seen such good prey in moons!" "Yes," Snowpaw retorted. But it wasn't true. He had been sitting under a pine tree, sulking, when the two pigeons had been fighting overhead. Over what- he didn't know. But he had watched, intrigued in the fight rather than catching them, and had even cowered in fear when a feather landed on his head.

But without warning, the two pigeons had fallen to the frozen forest floor, dead.

Now, Gingershadow picked up one of the pigeons in her jaws. "Well done, Snowpaw! Next time, do be quicker though- we're all hungry. Honeyshine's kits need to be fed." *Trust Gingershadow to find fault in even the best catch.*

As if on cue, Frostpaw's belly rumbled loudly. But Snowpaw averted his eyes guiltily. He wasn't hungry- he had eaten a vole while sulking. And he'd never done that- broken the warrior code- ever before. It was as if some kind of spirit had possessed him, but it had felt surprisingly good. The tension as he devoured it, the thrill of rebellion.... the sense of trying to do something he shouldn't...

"Snowpaw?" Ashtail nudged him sharply on the rump, looking concerned. "Oh! Sorry." Snowpaw blinked, carrying the pigeons in his jaws. It was as heavy as a boulder, and he stumbled slightly under its weight.

"Do you need my help?" Frostpaw was waiting for him, and Snowpaw saw a flicker of something he had never seen before in the white she-cat's eyes- admiration. But he knew that by bringing at least one of the pigeons back to camp, it would be proof that he had actually caught it, or rather, would fuel his lie. "No thanks, it's fine," he declined.

"Fine." Three small mice dangled from Frostpaw's jaws, and her tail drooped when Snowpaw rejected her offer. *The first time I did better than you, eh?* Snowpaw thought, then winced. When had such a bitter thought ever come to his mind?

Upon reaching camp, Cinderpaw and Nightpaw let out shocked yowls at Snowpaw's catch. The deputy, Cherrycloud, looked up from the thrush she was eating. "Great StarClan! I thought ThunderClan was attacking," she reprimanded the two apprentices, but they jumped to their paws and hurried over to Snowpaw. "Gingershadow told us that you'd caught the two pigeons, but I didn't quite believe it until this!" Cinderpaw purred, his tail waving excitedly. "Good job!" Nightpaw's blue eyes sparkled.

Snowpaw dropped the rabbit on the fresh-kill pile. "Thanks, you two. But I only did what any warrior would have done." "Not any warrior! It's especially hard in leaf-bare," Nightpaw pointed out, bumping her shoulder with Snowpaw's.

Even Cherrycloud looked up from her thrush again, but this time her sky-blue eyes were glowing with pride. "Well done, Snowpaw. Give some of that to Honeyshine, and tell her that the Clan will be full today. That queen is refusing to eat unless some cat tells her so- and StarClan knows how she knows whether we're lying or not!"

Snowpaw dipped his head respectfully to the cream-and-ginger she-cat. "Sure, Cherrycloud!" He tore off a wing, then trotted to the nursery, his tail high for the first time in moons.

"Honeyshine?" He poked his head in, tentative at first. It had been two moons since he'd seen her and the kits, and he felt unsure whether the yellow-and-white she-cat would welcome him or not. Honeyshine blinked from her nest. "Snowpaw? Come in, and is that pigeon I smell?"

Snowpaw entered, dropping the piece of prey in front of her. "Uh, I caught this, and Cherrycloud asked me to bring it to you," he told her awkwardly. Honeyshine narrowed her amber eyes. "Has the Clan been fed?" "Oh, yes! The Clan will be full today." Snowpaw's words tumbled out of him.

Honeyshine let out a purr and took a bite from the pigeon. "I haven't seen you so confident since Coldheart died, Snowpaw. It's good that you seem to be recovering." She then tore off the softest strip and called, "Barkkit, Brightkit, Coldkit! It's your time to try pigeon."

"Yay!" Brightkit, broke away from tussling with Coldkit and leaped in beside Honeyshine, taking the first strip and giving it a lick. "It's delicious!" she let out a purr and began nibbling at it, her eyes half-closed with pleasure.

Barkkit and Coldkit came next, with Barkkit immediately attacking the pigeon, and Coldkit ripping it to tiny shreds before chewing on the strips, reminding Snowpaw painfully of Coldheart. "Kits, Snowpaw caught the pigeon for you. What should you say?" Honeyshine reminded them sharply.

"Thank you!" Barkkit and Brightkit chorused, and Coldkit grabbed one of the tiny pieces and put it at Snowpaw's paws. "Have it as a thanks," he squeaked formally. Snowpaw let out a purr and nudged it back towards the white tom-kit. "No, Coldkit. It's perfectly fine. But based on your tone, I couldn't tell if you were a kit or a very small leader!"

Coldkit let out a squeal of delight. "Did you hear that? Snowpaw said that I'm a leader!" He boasted to his littermates, who exchanged a fond glance. "Coldkit is the strongest out of all of us," Barkkit informed Snowpaw, and Brightkit nodded vigourously. "And brave too! When Coldkit becomes leader, I wanna be his deputy!"

Honeyshine purred with laughter. "Kits, don't plan to undermine Mudstar and Cherrycloud!" Snowpaw flicked Coldkit teasingly over the ear. "But when I become leader, I'll make you deputy."

"Hey, that's unfair! What about the rest of us?" Barkkit protested,

indignant. He and Brightkit, having finished their portion, rushed toward Snowpaw, who wasn't ready for the unexpected attack. He let out a yelp as he was bowled over, and Coldkit quickly finished his share and knocked Barkkit off Snowpaw. "Get away from Snowstar, RiverClan warriors!" He squealed.

"Play outside, please!" Honeyshine told her kits. "And please don't disturb the other warriors." "We won't!" Brightkit yowled.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of them," Snowpaw promised the yellow-and-white she-cat. "If I'm going to be leader one day, I will have to learn how to take care of kits first!"

Honeyshine purred. "Good luck then. The kits are a pawful!" Her voice was encouraging, but Snowpaw saw the flash in the depths of her golden eyes.

Honeyshine doubted his words. And that made his ambition stronger, determined to prove his Clanmates all wrong.

And together with it rose the suppressed rage that would overflow one day.

Someday.

6 (NOW)

A small, young silver-and-white tabby she-cat halted beside him. Snowtuft smelt the ThunderClan scent coming off strongly from her, and wrinkled his nose.

Hawkfrost appeared next. "Ivypaw, this is Snowtuft." Ivypaw nodded, seeming quite shy, and Snowtuft narrowed his eyes. Shy won't get you anywhere here, apprentice! You need to toughen up.

"Thistleclaw!" Hawkfrost greeted their Clanmate, and Snowtuft saw Ivypaw jump beside him, jerking her head around to stare at the gray-and-white tom. "Good evening, Hawkfrost. Now many with us tonight." Thistleclaw's sharp green eyes glittered.

"Only the best." Without waiting for his Dark Forest ally to finish, Thistleclaw circled the rock, his tail lashing slowly. "You. Get on the rock." He nodded to Shredtail, who scrambled up eagerly onto the Meeting Stone.

"I want you to work together. You've got to knock him from the rock without letting him strike a blow to your heads. Do you understand?" Thistleclaw's order was clear and brisk, and when Shredtail nodded, he stepped back. "Begin."

Sparrowfeather leaped immediately, dealing a savage blow to Shredtail's face. Snowtuft saw Ivypaw bristle, then crouched down and launched herself at Shredtail, but was knocked aside by Antpelt. Snowtuft started forward, but Thistleclaw clouted Antpelt's ear harshly, making the WindClan tom wince.

By then, cats were crowding around Shredtail, who was becoming frantic. Snowtuft's eyes darted from one cat to another, observing where Shredtail's weak points were. "Scared?" Hawkfrost's ice-blue eyes glittered with a taunt.

"Never." Spotting a clear gap in the midst of the fighting cats, Snowtuft bunched his muscles and sprang, twisting in the air and

slamming both his front paws on Shredtail's forehead and pushing him backwards. At the same time, Ivypaw knocked him with both her small forepaws in the lower chest, and the dark brown tabby tom staggered.

But Shredtail recovered quickly, and lashed out at Ivypaw's eyes, but she jerked backward just in time. Snowtuft dealt a heavy blow to his exposed belly, and felt satisfaction spreading throughout his body at the sight of scarlet blood welling at the wound.

But without warning, Shredtail's yellow eyes widened in surprise, and he collapsed as his hind legs were yanked out from under him. Sparrowfeather was hauling the young warrior from the rock, her teeth sunk deep into Shredtail's hind leg. Shredtail wailed in agony, his claws outstretched to attempt to grip onto the rock.

"No!" Thistleclaw's roar startled Snowtuft, and he instinctively ducked as he swung a paw that knocked Sparrowfeather down, and the mottled brown tabby she-cat crashed, sprawling onto the grass. Snowtuft heard Ivypaw's swift intake of breath.

"I told you to knock him off. Not drag him. You cheated." Thistleclaw glared at Sparrowfeather, who twitched weakly and lifted her head. His voice was ominously soft.

"Sorry." Sparrowfeather croaked. Thistleclaw jabbed her with a paw. "Get up. It's your turn. And this time, don't cheat."

Sparrowfeather's head was bowed as she hauled herself onto the rock.

"Begin." Thistleclaw shot Sparrowfeather a last glare.

For a heartbeat no cat attacked, then Snowtuft shot forward with the speed of lightning, breaking the stunned spell. While Sparrowfeather had not fully recovered yet, he leaped forward and sank his teeth deep into her shoulder, tearing into it. Glee flooded him at the warm taste of blood in his mouth.

Sparrowfeather let out a yowl, thrusting him away with a powerful kick. Snowtuft tumbled away, barely managing to cling on at the

last moment.

Tigerheart was batting at the mottled brown she-cat's ears, while Ivypaw nipped at her tail. Antpelt's claws raked Sparrowfeather's back while Minnowtail's teeth were fastened at one of her legs. Spotting a small gap, Snowtuft sprang forward once more, and pushed his head against Sparrowfeather's belly. She shrieked as Snowtuft flipped her over with a powerful heave, and one of her paws banged against Breezepelt's skull.

"Breezepelt, out!" Thistleclaw called, and when the black WindClan tom continued swiping at Sparrowfeather's shoulders, the gray-and-white tom fastened his teeth to Breezepelt's scruff and pulled him from the fray, clouting his ear harshly. "I didn't realise that WindClan cats were deaf," Thistleclaw snapped.

Breezepelt winced and drew his paw over his bleeding ear. "No, we aren't. It's ThunderClan who's soft!"

While the two toms bickered, Snowtuft was pummelling Sparrowfeather's belly when Shredtail caught his eye and winked. Understanding flashed through Snowtuft just in time, and he leaped backward.

Sparrowfeather struggled to her paws, striking a blow at Ivypaw, who had been trying to creep up from behind her. The younger she-cat let out a yelp of terror and ducked, catching the blow on her flank. Scarlet blood welled out from the cut, and Ivypaw grimaced in pain.

As soon as Sparrowfeather regained her balance, Shredtail hurled himself forward, knocking Sparrowfeather off the rock. The mottled brown she-cat flung out a desparate paw, claws out, trying to hook onto the rock's uneven sides, but Antpelt darted forward and gave it a small nip. The Dark Forest she-cat let out a shriek as she tumbled down.

"Well done. Sparrowfeather, you may go lick your wounds- your performance was rather poor tonight, and I hope to see improvements." Thistleclaw padded up to them, his amber eyes stormy. Breezepelt limped up beside the dark gray-and-white tom, a

look of agony in his yellow eyes. Snowtuft deduced that it had not gone well for the black WindClan tom.

"As for the trainees, you may go back to your nests- you have all fought well today. Snowtuft, Shredtail, you may rest too. Afterwards, Brokenstar wants you to spar with some other Dark Forest warriors. And Sparrowfeather, you and I are going to have a one-to-one session as soon as you, ah, recover." Thistleclaw's voice was mocking as he glared down at the small she-cat.

"Come on." Shredtail flicked his tail on Snowtuft's injured shoulder, and he let out a hiss. "Sorry," Shredtail muttered as he and Snowtuft melted away into the shadows of the Dark Forest.

"Nevermind. But that was fun, wasn't it?" Snowtuft settled down and began washing his belly, running his barbed tongue over the healed scar that Shredtail had given him.

Shredtail sat down too, giving his paw a couple of licks and swiping them over his face. "Very. And interesting too. What do you make of the new apprentice, Ivypaw?" "I don't know. To me she seems to be like an average Clan warrior, but Hawkfrost thinks highly of her; he called her one of the best." Snowtuft glanced briefly up to see Shredtail's yellow eyes narrow.

"I don't know, but there just seems to be the scent of disloyalty on her."

7 (THEN)

"It's our warrior ceremony today!" Cinderpaw bounced out of his nest, yowling in excitement. Three moons had passed, and leaf-bare had gradually turned into newleaf. Silversong had sadly succumbed to a harsh bout of greencough, which she had been trying to hide from the medicine cats to prevent trouble. Flamestripe and Patchleaf had recovered, thankfully, though still weak. But the worst news of all was that Mudstar was on his last life- and it did not look well for him. The brown tom had lost his life when something- or someone- had pushed him toward the Thunderpath, straight into the path of a monster. He was now in the medicine den with a broken front leg, and infection was setting in despite Silverlight's best efforts.

Snowpaw blinked groggily, the bright sunlight dazzling him. Beside him, Nightpaw arched her back in a long stretch. "But who will hold our warrior ceremony?" She fretted, her tail-tip twitching with worry.

Frostpaw blinked at her best friend gently. "Don't worry, Nightpaw. If Mudstar can't hold the ceremony, Cherrycloud will replace him. It isn't your place to worry about him- you must focus on your assessment!" "Yeah, there's no need to act like a Clan leader," Cinderpaw teased his sister, already heading outside. Nightpaw huffed in annoyance. "I'm not the cat who wants to be Clan leader- Snowpaw is," she called to the gray tabby tom.

Frostpaw glanced at Snowpaw, then leaned closer to Nightpaw. Snowpaw was sure he wasn't supposed to hear her words, but he did. "I think you would be a better leader than my brother. He has no leadership qualities in him- I don't even know if he'll be a warrior!" Frostpaw hissed in Nightpaw's ear.

Snowpaw bristled with fury. As soon as Nightpaw left the den to have something to eat before her assessment, he barged in front of the white she-cat, grabbed her scruff in his jaws and hauled her into a shadowy corner just outside the den. Frostpaw let out a shocked

squeal as Snowpaw pinned her against the thick bramble wall, his eyes slitted with anger.

Frostpaw struggled in Snowpaw's grasp, kicking out wildly. "What is this for?" She growled, her ears flat against her head. "Why... why did you say that?" Snowpaw's words were full of hurt and resentment. "Because it is true!" Frostpaw blurted, then her leaf-green eyes widened in horror at her thoughtless words. "I mean..." she stammered, but the damage was done.

Snowpaw's grip on his sister slackened, and Frostpaw slithered to the ground ungracefully. "Why does every cat think that?" Snowpaw's voice was quiet, full of anguish. *Why can't I ever prove myself to my Clanmates?*

Frostpaw touched her tail gently to Snowpaw's shoulder, to which he shook her off. "Look, Snowpaw. Be realistic. Every cat knows that you can be afraid of anything- perhaps even air one day. And fear can be good- but there are times when it's just irrational. Coldheart died while drowning to save you- do you think he would have wanted you to be... like this? Coldheart was brave, and he would have wanted you to be, too." Frostpaw's throat ached from the effort of speaking, and the feel of Snowpaw's claws around her throat, choking her, stayed.

Without warning, Snowpaw whipped around and stretched himself to his full height, his yellow eyes glowering and full of hatred. "So? What's wrong with ambition? Coldheart could have been leader after Mudstar! So it has to be my duty to succeed him, do things our father could never do- because of me. And why me? Because you, Frostpaw, has none of his ambition! And I do! Get it?" A red haze clouded his vision as he glared at the white she-cat, who seemed to shrink into her pelt.

"Snowpaw? Frostpaw? What are you two doing here?" Snowpaw scented Gingershadow a heartbeat before the ginger she-cat thrust her way through the ferns, and the haze ebbed. He quickly drew back his claws, and sat down. By the time Gingershadow struggled her way in, Snowpaw was innocently asking, "Do you think Mudstar will be okay?" and Frostpaw's expression was half confusion, half terror.

"What's going on?" Gingershadow sat down beside Frostpaw, who leaned onto her shoulder. For a moment Snowpaw struggled to contain himself as he casually replied, "Nothing. Just talking about Mudstar."

Gingershadow frowned. Clearly she knew that it wasn't just that, but the ginger she-cat didn't pry. "Come on, then. Frostpaw, Nightpaw would be disappointed if you didn't talk to her before her assessment."

Before they left, Gingershadow shot one last look at Snowpaw, who avoided his mother's gaze. Instead, when they had left, he clawed furiously at the ground, picturing the faces of all those who had wronged him.

All those who needed to pay.

And for what?

Their lack of faith in him.

8 (THEN)

Why can't I sleep? Snowpaw's eyes opened yet again and he saw moonlight shining brightly into the apprentices' den, where he and Frostpaw were alone. The night was quiet, almost eerie. But tremors of fear ran through the young tom's heart. *StarClan knows what could happen the next moment... claws could pierce through my throat...* He curled into a tight ball, trembling.

But however hard he tried to fall asleep, something would wake him. This time, he heard a faint clink of gravel hitting the floor outside the den, and tensed. *Is there a cat outside, waiting to attack Frostpaw and me? Will he try to kill me first, or Frostpaw...?*

He let out a soft whimper of trepidation and shut his eyes tighter than ever, drawing his paws to cover his ears. But a voice- Frostpaw's voice from the morning- seemed to ring in his head. *Everyone knows that you can be afraid of anything... sometimes it is irrational... you can't be leader!*

The ferocity of his anger shocked him when he sat bolt upright, making Frostpaw grunt and roll over, the moonlight shining on her pale fur. He heard his own breath rattling in his chest, heavy and full of rage. *I can't do this anymore!*

He scrambled out of his nest and stood over Frostpaw, not even noticing that his claws were unsheathed. But even though his paw twitched, outstretched claws shifting towards the white she-cat's exposed belly, Snowpaw shuddered. *What am I thinking? Murdering my own sister?*

He gritted his teeth in self-control and headed out. Not a single cat was awake, except for the two twin dark shapes by the entrance- Cindersmoke and Nightwisp, the two newly names warriors sitting vigil. Snowpaw's shoulders tensed briefly, as if he expected some cat to attack him as he crept silently towards the dirtplace, and out of camp.

The pine trees loomed in front of him, dark and mysterious at night. Snowpaw gasped in awe as the moonlight pooled underneath one, and took no notice of where he put his paws, stupefied in his amazement.

Crack! He stepped on a twig, and it broke, splintering. Cindersmoke and Nightwisp's heads swivelled in his direction, and he saw Nightwisp's dark blue eyes narrow.

Snowpaw let out a soft yelp and darted back into the shadows, desperately praying that his white pelt wouldn't give him away. *Hopefully there are no foxes or badgers around....* I could be killed within heartbeats! For a moment he thought of going back to camp by the dirtplace, but decided against it. *No backing out ever again!*

Then Cindersmoke turned away, nudging his sister. Breathing a sigh of relief, Snowpaw stepped back into the moonlight, which formed a straight line- as if it wanted him to follow the path. *Strange. But what might I find?* Piqued by curiosity, he set his paws carefully, as if stalking a mouse, and began to follow the trail.

The trail led him deeper into the woods, and soon, into unknown territory. Snowpaw could no longer scent ShadowClan around him, but instead, pine sap and sharp air curling around his muzzle. *I'll follow my scent later, then.*

But suddenly, the moonlight trail vanished, and he was left in a circle of silvery light. Frowning, he turned around slowly... and saw three pairs of eyes glinting in the dark.

"Who's there?" His voice came out as a timid whisper as he unsheathed his claws, his tail twitching from side to side.

"You know, kitten, we should be asking you that." A big black-and-white tom stepped out from the shadows, his pale green eyes glittering with menace. A dappled tortoiseshell she-cat followed him, followed by a young dark brown tabby tom that looked about Snowpaw's age. "I-" Snowpaw swallowed, his gaze flitting from one side to another.

But to his horror, cats emerged from all sides, growling and

advancing. "So? Why did you have to come trampling here and disturbing our sleep?" The black-and-white tom snarled at him, lips peeled back.

"My... my name is Snowpaw from ShadowClan. I... I couldn't sleep and just... took a walk, I guess." Snowpaw fumbled with his words, but to his surprise, the dappled tortoiseshell she-cat's dark green eyes narrowed with interest. "Ah, I see. A Clan cat... breaking the rules, I suppose?"

Snowpaw's eyes widened. "Do you know the Clans?" "Of course. I myself was exiled from ShadowClan after I took one of Mudstar's lives." The black-and-white tom spoke again, but with less hostility. "My name is Batear, and I used to be from ShadowClan. Fenneldust here came from ThunderClan." He gestured towards a light brown tabby she-cat, who dipped her head.

"How many former Clan cats are there?" Snowpaw ventured. "Pretty few. There are plenty more rogues, and we want to get revenge on the Clans, one by one. Except that we didn't know which..." Batear looked seriously at Snowpaw. "But now, if you want, we can destroy ShadowClan with you. For you."

"I... I don't know." Snowpaw's tongue was already itching to agree, but he held back. Part of him still had loyalty to his birth Clan, the Clan that raised him for so long.

"I understand. But whenever you want to talk, feel free to come. Unless he betrays us, in which case he will be killed, he will be treated as one of us." Batear instructed the other cats, who nodded.

Light was flooding the clearing, and Snowpaw realised with a jolt that dawn was coming. "I've got to get back to my Clan!"

Batear nodded. "Shred, Tear and Rip can escort you back, then. Just to your border," he added when Snowpaw opened his mouth to protest. The dark brown tabby tom from the first came forward, together with a gray-and-white she-cat and a black tom with sliver-striped legs. All were about Snowpaw's age- he guessed that Batear wanted to make him feel better. Snowpaw dipped his head. "Thank you."

Soon, they were trotting back to camp. Shred bumped his side against Snowpaw's in a friendly way. "Hey. Do you think your leader would mind if I joined ShadowClan to be with you? It seems pretty lonely for you."

"What? But what would Batear say?" Snowpaw tried to come up with an excuse to say no to Shred. "It will be fine. You and Shred can report to him." Tear, the gray-and-white she-cat, reassured him. Rip just scowled.

Shred gazed up at Snowpaw pleadingly. Snowpaw sighed, his shoulders slumping. *How will I explain to Cherrycloud?*

"Alright, fine then. But I probably will be punished for straying out of camp on my own." "No you won't. I've got a plan for you two." Rip's light blue eyes lit up as he leaned forward to whisper...

9 (NOW)

"The Dark Forest will rise up and stamp out the Clans. StarClan will bow down to us, and the warriors who chose not to join us will be punished beyond the end of their lives." Mapleshade was hissing to Tigerheart, in her raspy voice.

Snowtuft pressed his belly closer to the ground, fear tightening his throat. Glancing sideways, he caught Shredtail's eye- the dark brown tabby tom was half-concealed by the shadows of a tall tree nearby, watching him.

Snowtuft swallowed and crept closer to the conversation. He regretted his choice as soon as he'd made it...

Shredtail and Snowtuft had been strolling through the Dark Forest, bored, when they had come upon Tigerheart and Mapleshade having a conversation; Mapleshade was looking in a particularly bad mood. But it was at that moment when Shredtail had dared Snowtuft to interrupt the conversation.

Snowtuft had felt terror just at the thought, but Shredtail had been ShadowClan- he knew what the warriors had thought of Snowtuft when he was younger, and had always been looking for a chance to tease him again about being a mouse-heart.

So, he had agreed. Shredtail's yellow eyes had glittered with surprise- clearly the younger tom hadn't expected that. But Snowtuft's fate was sealed. So now, he was here, his limbs trembling as he inched closer, scarcely breathing.

"Every cat who ever lived will know-" Mapleshade broke off abruptly, sniffing the air. Oh no... Snowtuft got up hastily and scrabbled towards the ferns, seeing Shredtail's yellow eyes glitter with alarm. "I smell fear. Who has come here with insufficient courage to face their Clanmates?" He heard Mapleshade growl behind him.

He glanced back, peering through the dead brambles. The tortoiseshell she-cat swung her head around, nose in the air. Then she got to her paws... and headed towards him, tearing the brambles away. Snowtuft let out a whimper as she towered over him, her amber eyes glowering. "Snowtuft! I might have known! You mangy pile of dung, get back to the fight and show some mettle." Mapleshade snarled, and Snowtuft was too slow to see the incoming blow.

It struck him at the side of his head, and he let out a shriek of pain, tumbling away. He could feel blood spurting out, and saw it staining the brambles. He glared furiously at Mapleshade. "What? Go on, attack me," she challenged him.

But Snowtuft knew the outcome if he attacked the she-cat- either he or Mapleshade would be lying dead on the floor. And it was pretty obvious that it was him. So, he simply shook his head and backed away, his tail between his legs in submission. "Good. At least you have some sense," Mapleshade growled, then she too headed into the trees.

Once she had left, Snowtuft whirled around and glowered at Shredtail, not caring about the ache on the side of his head, still throbbing furiously. "Happy now?" He snarled savagely at the dark brown tabby tom, who flinched but stood his ground, then licked his paw as if to appear nonchalant. "You agreed to the dare yourself- you could have backed out," Shredtail pointed out coolly, though there was a hint of guilt in his yellow eyes.

Snowtuft let out a low hiss, unsheathing his claws. "I think we both know your true intentions, Shredtail." "What? It's not my problem that you can't stand a little teasing- and what I would say would be true!" Shredtail defended himself hotly, his neck fur fluffing out.

"Well, that was before. Now... think again!" Snowtuft flew at his Dark Forest Clanmate, sinking his teeth into Shredtail's shoulder. The younger tom let out a startled yowl of pain and swiped at Snowtuft's forehead roughly.

The blow made Snowtuft reel, and Shredtail struggled free, pouncing on Snowtuft and raking his spine harshly with hind claws.

Pain scorched like fire, and Snowtuft struggled, rolling over and wrapping his front paws around Shredtail's neck.

Shredtail bit down hard on his foreleg and Snowtuft tumbled off, flashing out a paw and tearing deep into the dark brown tabby tom's ear. Shredtail let out a shocked screech as blood trickled down his face, and without warning threw himself at Snowtuft's chest, unbalancing him.

The two fighting toms tussled fiercely, neither one letting go of the other. Snowtuft grimaced as Shredtail ripped at his cheek, then retaliated by using his hind paws to batter his opponent's soft belly. Shredtail shrieked and fell back, blood spurting from the wound.

Snowtuft felt exhaustion and agony weighing on his shoulders. "Let's end this," he growled, fixing Shredtail with a stare. He lifted his head to meet it, but was too weak to hold it for long. "Okay. You fought well- for a former mouse-heart." Shredtail's croak held signs of humour in it, and Snowtuft grinned devilishly.

"You fought well too- for one who hasn't earned his near-death battle scar... yet."

10 (THEN)

"I can't believe you three managed to pull that off," Snowpaw grumbled as he, Shredpaw, Tearpaw and Fleapaw headed into the forest together in search of moss- Shredpaw and Tearpaw were taking care of the elders today, and Snowpaw was showing them the best moss place before meeting Slatepetal and Ashtail, who was Fleapaw's mentor.

As Snowpaw closed his eyes, relishing the cool wind ruffling his neck fur, he couldn't help but remember the genius plan. Shredpaw, Tearpaw and Rip had gone back to report to Batear, and the dawn patrol had found 'three lost kitties in the woods' and had brought them into camp. Shredpaw, Tearpaw and Fleapaw had put on their best pitiful and innocent faces and Mudstar- who was slightly better, fine enough to walk- had accepted them into the camp, despite some suspicions from the older warriors. But so far, the first day had gone well- up to now, sunhigh.

"Hey! Are you asleep? Slatepetal and Ashtail are probably waiting for us." Fleapaw nudged his shoulder, and Snowpaw blinked open his eyes. "I thought the rules were stupid," he joked, nudging his new denmate back as they headed deeper into the forest.

"Yes." The gray-and-brown tom glanced over his shoulder anxiously. "But it's our trial, isn't it? If me, Tearpaw and Shredpaw fail this, then Batear's plan will go wrong." "What plan?" Snowpaw leaned closer, intrigued.

Fleapaw winked at him. "I can only tell those who have an aim to destroy the Clans," he purred smoothly, his voice as sly as a fox's. Frustration burned in Snowpaw's belly. "Who says I don't, too?" he shot back.

The other apprentice's amber eyes brightened but at that moment, Ashtail walked up to them. "Ah, there you are! I was just about to find you two- come on, Slatepetal's getting quite impatient." Snowpaw swallowed, his worry rising at his mentor's name. *What is*

Slatepetal going to do? Will she...

They found the spotted gray she-cat pacing around, her fluffy tail swishing in the air. Slatepetal whipped around as they neared her, her sky-blue eyes narrowing with irritation as she caught Snowpaw's gaze. "What took you two so long?" She snapped, and Snowpaw seemed to shrink under the force of her glare. "I'm sorry," he whimpered.

Fleapaw let out a snort and nudged Snowpaw's hindquarters with his nose. "Get up, Snowpaw. Are you actually so mouse-hearted?" Snowpaw stiffened at the old insult, his neck fur starting to fluff out.

Slatepetal switched her gaze from Snowpaw to Fleapaw, and for a heartbeat she seemed to be rather amused. Then the spotted she-cat instructed, "Today we are going to practice stalking birds, or rather, tree prey. Snowpaw, don't you dare yawn- StarClan knows how many times we did this, and how many more times you failed!" Her voice was laced with disappointment.

"Alright. Let us see your crouches. Fleapaw, watch Snowpaw first- this is rather advanced, but Slatepetal wanted to see how you did." Ashtail took over, and Snowpaw immediately dropped into a crouch, and Fleapaw tipped his head to one side, studying him intently.

Slatepetal let out a long groan and used a half-sheathed paw to bat Snowpaw's tail down. "That tail's always bobbing in the air. Leaf-bare's already over, so you'll be sticking out. So you have to make yourself smaller! The bird will be able to see you from a fox-length away, the way you're practically splayed out. Lower yourself to the ground, too."

From the corner of his eye, Snowpaw saw Fleapaw wince in sympathy. When Slatepetal had finally finished, Snowpaw watched as Fleapaw dropped down to an almost perfect crouch- his tail lowered but straight enough to keep his balance, hind paws drawn in to produce a powerful leap. Ashtail nudged the apprentice's front paws a little closer. "You can stretch out your neck a little if you want," he told the gray-and-brown tom, who nodded.

Snowpaw let out a small snicker when Fleapaw stretched a little too far and overbalanced, tumbling to the soft forest floor, but abruptly stopped when Slatepetal gave him a look. "Fleapaw, I think you did better than Snowpaw," she praised the other apprentice, all the while she was giving Snowpaw the stink eye.

Snowpaw dropped his gaze, and Fleapaw blurted, "I used to watch birds all the time when I was with Tearpaw and Shredpaw, when we were abandoned. So it's not Snowpaw's fault." Snowpaw felt grateful to his new friend, his his heart sank once more when Slatepetal growled, "He should be ready for his warrior assessment by now, but still hasn't mastered the simple stalking technique!"

He felt that familiar rush of rage through him, and couldn't hold himself any longer. "Why do I have to master everything? As a warrior, I still learn, don't I?" He burst out, claws shredding a leaf lying at his paws.

A shocked look came to Ashtail's face, but Slatepetal remained furious. "Oh, so now I get it! You don't want to be a perfect warrior, like every cat. You want to be a lowly one, don't you? Okay, fine!" With a last snarl, she stalked away, toward the camp.

Shame burning his ears, Snowpaw dropped his gaze. Ashtail walked over to him. "It's alright, Snowpaw. Just apologise to her later." He felt a tongue rasping warmly over his ear.

"But if I don't know what to apologise?" He hissed bitterly.

Ashtail fell silent, and Snowpaw walked away, his heart throbbing with pain and anger.

11 (THEN)

"Your assessments will be in a half moon's time. In case you don't know, you will have to hunt in the morning, then after eating, you will be tasked to fight a cat- Mudstar or Cherrycloud will pick at random. So, even though Slatepetal says that hunting is priority, we are going to focus today on fighting techniques, for Mudstar may choose an experienced warrior." Blazemist stared straight at Snowpaw, who flinched. He knew he preferred hunting to battle- many accidents could happen!

He did not meet his mentor's gaze. Since their quarrel, three days ago, he had barely spoken to her- every exchange was cold, though Snowpaw kept up with training. Thankfully, he trained with Frostpaw, Fleapaw, Tearpaw and Shredpaw too, avoiding a one-to-one with Slatepetal.

"Snowpaw, you and Frostpaw will fight first, as a warm-up. But take this seriously- I do not want any of you to be playing around," Snowpaw could feel Slatepetal's blue eyes trained on him. "Understood, Snowpaw?" *I never played around!* He lifted his head to glare at his mentor. "Yeah, sure," he responded, his voice as chilly as the leaf-bare wind.

Frostpaw caught his eye and frowned, but Snowpaw didn't want to explain. Fleapaw had not told a single cat about their argument, and the white she-cat had been oblivious to the tension between her brother and his mentor.

"Begin!" Blazemist stepped back and sat down next to Slatepetal. Snowpaw backed away as Frostpaw advanced on him, and ducked when she flew at him. He heard Slatepetal groan, but the spotted she-cat didn't say anything as Frostpaw threw out a paw and hooked onto him, flipping him deftly onto his back.

Embarrassment rushing through him, Snowpaw kicked out desperately, a weak attempt which Frostpaw avoided easily. The white she-cat placed a paw on his neck, and the scorn in her leaf-

green eyes told Snowpaw everything. Blazemist glanced at Slatepetal, who looked as if she wanted to both kill Snowpaw and die.

Blazemist opened his mouth to say something when rustling in the bushes startled them. Frostpaw's hackles were high, and Snowpaw's ears twitched as he crouched down, his yellow eyes wide with fear as he practically hid behind Frostpaw.

Three figures, their pelts caked with mud and dirt and eyes gleaming, hurled themselves out, and Snowpaw let out a shriek of fear and darted toward the mentors, his fur bushed out. But they had vanished- and his anxiety rose. Then Frostpaw let out a high-pitched squeak, and Snowpaw glanced back to see her struggling beneath the three attackers. He ran forward, panic making his heart pump twice its normal speed.

He flung himself into the fray, sinking his teeth into the neck of one and kicking out at another. His paws seemed to fly as he swiped and hissed, dodging and lashing out. But then he saw a pair of familiar yellow eyes. Gray-and-white fur showing beneath the mud. Familiar soft paws battering at his belly, sheathed despite the battle.

Snowpaw let go of the tom beside him. "Shredpaw? Fleapaw? Tearpaw? What are you three doing?" He choked out, backing away from the three cats with his tail fluffed out. Did they betray ShadowClan- betray me?

Just as rage was beginning to bubble in his belly, Slatepetal, Blazemist and Frostpaw padded out from a thick clump of ferns. Snowpaw was barely aware of them, poised to attack, when Frostpaw placed a tail on his shoulder. "Snowpaw, calm down."

"Calm down? They attacked you, Frostpaw! And they- they betrayed ShadowClan and-" Snowpaw was cut off by Blazemist, whose eyes were glittering with amusement. "No, Snowpaw. We planned this all along."

"What?" Snowpaw couldn't believe his ears. "So..."

Slatepetal stepped forward, her sky-blue eyes warm for the first time in the whole apprenticeship- but slightly hesitant as well as she brushed her plumy tail along Snowpaw's spine. "We wanted to see how well you could actually fight when threatened. It was Shredpaw and Fleapaw's idea, actually." She glanced toward the two younger apprentices, who ducked their heads. Tearpaw's purr rumbled in her throat.

"So. How did you feel about that?" Goldpelt, Silkclaw and Ashtail slid out of the ferns, their tails waving in the air. Snowpaw hesitated, remembering the heart-stopping moment, the terror that made his paws tremble. The word 'terrifying' was at the tip of his tongue.

But then came the exhilaration as his blows connected. The satisfaction at the squeals of pain. Blood bursting beneath his tongue when he had bitten Shredpaw's ear. The darkness of his heart taking over for that skilful moment.

Snowpaw grinned- it looked almost twisted, almost cruel. "Amazing!"

12 (NOW)

Time to go for the meeting. Snowtuft nodded to Whiskerpaw. "You may leave earlier today- you need your rest."

The young light brown tom blinked gratefully at him. "Thanks, Snowtuft! But how did I do today?" Whiskerpaw's pelt was streaked with soil and blood- Snowtuft never went easy on his apprentices.

Snowtuft was amused by the light brown tabby tom's enthusiasm. "Not bad, but you must put more force on your blows, and always anticipate your enemy's movements." Not bothering to wait for him any longer, he stalked into the trees, making sure that Whiskerpaw faded out of the trees.

"Snowtuft?" He had gone barely a few paw steps when he recognised Hawkfrost's call. The dark brown tabby tom greeted him with a growl. "Are you heading for the meeting?"

Of course! What else would I be doing? "I wouldn't miss it for all the mice in the forest," he rasped, then to check, added, "Where are the Clan cats?" "Tigerstar sent them back to their nests." Hawkfrost let out a snort.

Snowtuft unsheathed his claws, letting them scrape satisfyingly on the earth. "Are you sure there won't be any hanging around the training rock?" He had to be cautious. "Brokenstar will make sure there aren't," Hawkfrost growled, sounding sure of himself.

They quickened their pace, trotting through the forest toward the rock. "How are the new ones coming along?" Snowtuft questioned. Hawkfrost shrugged his broad shoulders, his ice-blue eyes darkening. "When I arrived, Ivypool was thinking that sheathed paws were a good idea."

"That's toad-brained. They would have no motivation to fight their best," Snowtuft snarled, rolling his eyes. "I don't know why Tigerstar wanted to recruit them." "We need information about the lake Clans

to win, in case you don't know." There was an edge to the other cat's tone, and Hawkfrost's eyes were narrowed dangerously. Treasuring his ears and pelt, Snowtuft subsided, letting the dark brown tabby tom lead as they made their way to the training rock.

"Good. You're all here. The time is close," Brokenstar greeted them, his dark fur spiked with excitement. Mapleshade, below him, raised her pale muzzle. "Good. I'd hate to miss it," she hissed, amber eyes slitted with anticipation.

Hawkfrost sat down, watching every move intently. Shredtail and Thistleclaw were pacing, and Snowtuft sat at the corner of the clearing, wrapping his tail around his paws. Tigerstar was stiff-legged, his tail lashing. "When will we strike first?" He demanded, clearly impatient. Today, they were discussing WindClan- RiverClan had already been done.

Brokenstar slid easily from the boulder and scratched a line in the muddy earth. "This is where the lake meets the land." He slashed with deft claws multiple shapes- WindClan territory, and Snowtuft leaned closer to get a better view. "We will come at them from here and here. And while they are fighting there, another patrol will strike here." The dark brown tabby tom stabbed at the earth, and Snowtuft tipped his head to one side, taking everything in.

"They'll be weaker where the hill slopes down to the brook. We can come at them from higher ground and drive them backward," Brokenstar explained and Snowtuft nodded slowly.

"What if we approach from here instead?" Tigerstar roughly jabbed the map with one long foreclaw, and Brokenstar's eyes lit up with interest. "At the very heart of the Clan!" "Once the kits are dead, their mothers will have less to fight for," Mapleshade pointed out, cruelty edging her mew. Snowtuft's eyes rounded with eagerness. *They're right. Killing the kits first...* his lip twisted into a wicked grin, and he unsheathed his claws, picturing them plunging into soft kit-flesh.

"You're right. It's decided, then." Brokenstar sat back, and just like that, the meeting was over. His neck fur still bristling with the excitement and tension, Snowtuft followed Silverhawk out, and

jerked around upon hearing a patter of paws.

It was Shredtail, and this time he was accompanied by Fleawhisker. "That was interesting," Fleawhisker remarked. Shredtail saw the bristling fur and teased, "Not scared, eh?" But there was carefulness in his tone, one that Snowtuft greatly appreciated.

Snowtuft snickered, nudging the dark brown tom. "Never again."

13 (THEN)

"You fought well today, Snowpaw." Frostpaw was already drifting into sleep- her mew was slurred with exhaustion. Ever since Snowpaw had defeated Shredpaw, Tearpaw and Fleapaw in the mock attack, he had been less shy of his actions than before, unafraid to strike out at Slatepetal when training later on. He had even defeated Frostpaw once in a mock battle!

"You too. Good night." Snowpaw watched her leaf-green eyes close and within moments, the white she-cat was asleep. He glanced around the den, catching Tearpaw's eye. Fleapaw was curled up too, but one yellow eye was open, watching every move.

Within moments, Shredpaw poked his head in. "Gingershadow," he breathed. The four apprentices exchanged worried glances. The ginger she-cat was known for her sharp eyesight- she could spot a mouse that was burrowing deep inside stacks of hay. Furthermore, Shredpaw, Tearpaw and Fleapaw were not to go out at night- the precautions for inviting strangers in.

But Snowpaw felt different this night. On usual nights, he would give up, and tell the others that it was hopeless. But his mind was working overtime, and his yellow eyes narrowed. "I've got it!" he burst out, making Frostpaw stir. They fell silent, and within moments the she-cat was in deep sleep once more.

Tearpaw gazed at him curiously, while Shredpaw's tail-tip twitched. "Tell us," the gray-and-white she-cat probed urgently, glancing at the moon; Batear did not tolerate lateness. "I'll go distract her, and you three slip out through the dirtplace," Snowpaw told them simply.

"What about you?" Fleapaw's head was tipped. "Don't worry. I can manage," Snowpaw told the gray-and-brown tom grimly. But Tearpaw's blue eyes slitted and Shredpaw padded closer, his whiskers twitching. "If you betray us..."

"Why would I?" The darkness in Snowpaw's heart stirred, and he unsheathed his claws and held them up to catch the moonlight. The dark brown tabby tom flinched, then tried to keep his cool. "ShadowClan is your home, anyway. You don't even want to destroy them."

Snowpaw rolled his eyes. "Very well, then." He headed back to his nest, but a tail barred his path. He glanced up to see Fleapaw. "Stop moving," the gray-and-brown apprentice commanded, his voice trembling slightly. "Why?" Tearpaw's voice was hushed.

But once they fell silent, they could hear it. Rustling at the dirtplace. Voices. Fur brushing against the thorns.

Snowpaw couldn't hold it in- he let out a shriek and pelted outside, crashing into a dark-furred pelt. ThunderClan scent filled his nostrils. A yowl sounded from the camp entrance as more of them broke in. *Gingershadow!*

All around him, cats were emerging from the dens, fur rumpled with sleep. The cat whom Snowpaw had bumped into flung him down with one paw, and glowered at him through icy blue eyes. Snowpaw guessed that it was Darkthorn, a warrior known for his sneakiness and skill at spying- his mother had been stolen from ShadowClan as a kit.

"A little kit out of the nursery, eh?" Darkthorn sneered, raking his claws across Snowpaw's chest. Panic pressing on his lungs, Snowpaw kicked out, leaving a trail of bright red blood across Darkthorn's belly.

But the black tom didn't budge, tearing both ear tips with a single swipe. As his jaws neared Snowpaw's throat, he tensed...

"Get off him!" A flash of white fur landed squarely on Darkthorn's shoulders and flung him backwards. Frostpaw growled, a noise rumbling deep in her throat. "Two kits. Huh. Won't bother me," Darkthorn snorted, ducking a blow that sent the white she-cat staggering.

"Make that five." Before Darkthorn could react, Fleapaw, Tearpaw

and Shredpaw attacked the black warrior at the same time, raking their claws down his face, shoulders and chest. Tearpaw bit down hard on Darkthorn's tail, making him screech with rage.

"Come on! We've got to help the others." Frostpaw nipped Snowpaw's hindquarters. "What? But we are only apprentices..." Snowpaw felt despairingly small. The white she-cat just rolled her eyes. "Why are you a mouse-heart again?" she grumbled, half to herself.

Darkness rose in Snowpaw's heart, blotting out everything else. "Shut up!" he cried, turning on the nearest cat- Violetwind. The spotted brown-and-white she-cat reared back, but was too slow to avoid Snowpaw's direct headbutt. He lashed out at the young she-cat's cheek, and Violetwind battered at Snowpaw's exposed belly, scattering tufts of fur.

Pain made him rake harder, scoring his hind claws across the spotted she-cat's spine. Violetwind's dark green eyes widened with terror when Snowpaw clamped his jaws around her neck, pure satisfaction thrilling through him once more...

Then teeth gripped his scruff and hauled him backwards. Gingerstrike and Leopardleap glared at him, and Violetwind scrambled out from under him. "You won't kill her," Gingerstrike snarled, his voice raw with grief; his mate, Rabbitswoop, had died from a rockfall shortly after she gave birth to the two she-cats.

"Then I'll kill you!" Snowpaw flung himself at the orange tabby tom, who was so taken aback that Snowpaw easily knocked him off his paws. There was a gasp of shock from Violetwind, and claws fastened into his back and teeth fastened into his leg, pulling it backwards.

He thrashed within the three cats' grip, red clouding his vision. His jaws snapped, connecting with flesh that he tore viciously. There was a shriek of agony, and Leopardleap lay beneath him in a pool of blood, which pumped from her side steadily- but she was alive. There was a wail from Violetwind, and Gingerstrike's paw flew out, so fast that Snowpaw knew that he wouldn't be able to stop it.

A flash of spotted gray fur, and Slatepetal fell onto the slippery, blood-soaked ground, letting out a groan. Both her white ears had been badly torn, and long slashes were visible on her shoulders. But the death blow was the fountain of blood coming from her neck, the sticky liquid lapping at Snowpaw's paws as he crouched beside his mentor. Behind him, he heard Gingerstrike and Violetwind shifting away to take Leopardleap away, to try and heal the spotted golden she-cat's wounds before it was too late.

But it was definitely too late for his mentor- the perfectionist whom Snowpaw had just bonded with this very day, and the cat who had lessened the darkness in Snowpaw's heart. Slatepetal's pale blue eyes blinked up at Snowpaw slowly, full of affection and pride. "Don't disappoint me," she whispered.

"I won't, Slatepetal. I will never disappoint you again." Snowpaw pressed his nose to her bleeding wound, making her wince slightly. But then the spotted gray she-cat's eyes glazed over, and the light- the first and last proud light- flickered out. The last bits of brightness in Snowpaw's heart, too, flickered out.

Darkness enveloped his heart, his mind, as Snowpaw gave Slatepetal's blood-stained ears one final lick and headed into the battle once more.

He had a death to avenge. And he couldn't rely on ShadowClan on that. The sky opened up, and rain poured down.

14 (THEN)

To say that Snowpaw fought like a warrior would be an understatement. He fought like a whole Clan, a whole pack of dogs, not even caring about the rain.

The young apprentice's paws practically flew as he lashed out, swiping at every cat who dared come within a fox-length of him. His jaws snapped and teared, and Snowpaw relished the pained cries of his enemies. But he didn't care about him- his job was to wipe out the kin of Gingerstrike. Gingerstrike, the tom who had taken away Snowpaw's mentor, the tom who had caused Snowpaw to almost give in to the darkness in his heart.

Spotting Violetwind and Gingerstrike fighting against Tearpaw, Ashtail and Silkclaw, Leopardleap lying to one side. Snowpaw's lip curled maliciously. *It's time to finish what I started.*

Dodging Sootwisp's blow, Snowpaw grabbed the gray-black tom's foreleg and twisted it, slamming Sootwisp to the ground. He let out a high-pitched shriek of agony and thumped to the wet ground, his shoulder bent at a concerning angle.

But Snowpaw didn't care. He raced toward Leopardleap, who was barely conscious. Blood dripped slowly from the wound. Her amber eyes were hazy and confused as she murmured, "Gingerstrike?"

"No. Your killer," Snowpaw snarled, raising one paw. Just as the ThunderClan she-cat's eyes widened in panic and recognition, Snowpaw brought it down on her side again, cutting deeper until the white bone glinted underneath a tide of scarlet blood. Leopardleap fell limp, her eyes glazing over. The blood flowed onto the ground, mixing with rainwater that lapped around Snowpaw's bloody paws.

"Snowpaw!" Before he had time to react, jaws fastened around his scruff and hauled him backward into a thick clump of bracken. Snowpaw hissed and wriggled out, turning on his attacker.

But it was Frostpaw. And his sister's leaf-green eyes were flashing with horror and rage. "Don't you know the warrior code? We don't kill!" Blood trickled from a gash in her forehead, and her throat was clumped with blood. Frostpaw's snowy white fur was coated with blood, and she almost looked like an orange cat.

If Snowpaw felt any worry for his sister, he did not show it. "Then explain to me why Gingerstrike, that lame excuse for a cat, killed Slatepetal," he rasped, his voice thick with grief.

Frostpaw's leaf-green eyes softened. "You're grieving." She dipped her head. "But you can't just kill other cats like that. It's the warrior code." "The warrior code is bee-brained!" Snowpaw burst out, his claws shredding the bracken under his paws.

The white she-cat was taken aback, her jaws opening and closing. Then, her claws slid out, and her eyes narrowed. "If you think that, you are no longer my brother," she hissed. "Were we ever siblings?" Snowpaw shot back savagely.

Frostpaw flinched, but left without a word. Snowpaw stared after her, then followed into the thickest of the battle, where many cats were tussling together. The darkness took over another piece of his heart, ever so close to having complete control over the young ShadowClan tom.

And suddenly, the crowd parted. ThunderClan and ShadowClan alike, they halted abruptly and turned their gazes to the centre of the clearing, where Mudstar and Amberstar stared at each other, their chests heaving.

Mudstar's head was bowed, and his brown-and-black fur was matted with blood. "Why? Why did you have to attack us?" "Oh, you don't know? Scents have been found across the border- many cats, and some smelling of ShadowClan," Amberstar snarled, her hackles up.

Snowpaw felt as if a paw had shot out and hit him on the chest. He exchanged a glance with Shredpaw, whose eyes were full of shock and some guilt as well. Tearpaw and Fleapaw were frozen, their faces wearing identical stricken expressions. *I'm sorry,* the dark brown tom mouthed to Snowpaw, who turned his head away to

watch the two leaders.

"So that's it? Just because of some prey?" Mudstar croaked. Amberstar's amber eyes flashed with pain. "Speckledpatch, Stormkit and Sparkkit died of starvation, just because of the lack of prey. We could have attacked, if..." The calico she-cat broke off, glancing away.

Mudstar's yellow eyes softened; Snowpaw somehow could tell that before becoming leader, the two cats had been friends. "We can end this now." The ShadowClan leader gestured around the small skirmishes around them, closer to the entrance. The sun was rising now, and the downpour had turned into a light drizzle.

Amberstar stared back at the brown-and-black tom, who looked more weary than any of them- except for Slatepetal and Leopardleap, obviously. She let out a heavy sigh. "ThunderClan, retreat! This battle was uncalled for."

The ThunderClan cats pushed past the broken thorn barrier, streaming after their leader. Pausing for a moment, Amberstar bowed her head to Mudstar. "I'm sorry. It is obvious now that none of your cats trespassed on our territory." "It's fine." The brown-and-black tom reached out with his tail to touch the calico's shoulder as she led her Clan away. Gingerstrike bent down so that Violetwind could put Leopardleap's body on his back. But as they left, Snowpaw caught Gingerstrike's eye and glowered at the orange tabby tom, baring his teeth. *We're not done yet.*

But even when Gingerstrike's tail dragged against the bloodstained earth, Snowpaw felt no pity. *He deserves it...*

15 (NOW)

"Snowtuft, WindClan." Hawkfrost looked up, his ice-blue eyes glinting. Snowtuft felt a prick of anger. "Why not ShadowClan? Or even ThunderClan?"

"We need to spread out evenly. Most of us are from ShadowClan- we don't want overcrowding," the dark brown tabby tom replied evenly, though Snowtuft discerned an edge to his tone. Letting out a frustrated growl, he padded over to stand beside Thistleclaw. Shredtail, at the ShadowClan side, looked sympathetic.

"At least it could have been ShadowClan," Snowtuft grumbled to Tearstone, who touched her nose to his ear. "It's fine. At least we are avenging on the Clans!" She purred, her amber eyes sparkling. Snowtuft's spirits rose too- that was true, at least.

Thistleclaw led them towards the living Clans. Snowtuft heard every cat chanting, and joined in. "We'll kill them all!" "Death to the Clans!" Determination and thirst for vengeance burned in his belly as the slimy grass beneath his paws turned to soft, lush ones. Not for long- it'll be stained with blood of our enemies...

Thistleclaw paused and turned to Snowtuft, Branchear, Willowbird and Twigleap. "You four, stay and wait here. If I'm not wrong, there will be patrols. Stop them to the best of your abilities, then join us at the main battle. Snowtuft, you're in charge."

His shoulders lifting with pride, Snowtuft led the other three cats into a thick gorse bush. "Branchear, you stay here with Twigleap. Willowbird and I will be on that ash tree over there." Snowtuft nodded to a lonely old tree, which would be hard for the two WindClan siblings to climb. Willowbird was ThunderClan, so would be able to climb the tree even better than Snowtuft. "When you see a patrol, lure them to us so that we can drop down and surprise them."

Branchear, the wiry brown tom who had just earned the title of a

warrior in the Dark Forest, nodded grimly. His brother, Twigleap, narrowed his leaf-green eyes, the tip of his tail twitching from side to side. Snowtuft hoped that the two toms could obey his instructions efficiently- both were the junior ones in the Dark Forest.

They did not have to wait for long. Snowtuft and Willowbird had hardly gotten comfortable when a patrol of five cats appeared over the rise, charging down. *They must have heard the sounds of battle.* In the camp, screeches could be heard clearly.

"Ashfoot and Leaftail," Willowbird breathed. Snowtuft squinted. "Heathertail, Gorsetail and Sunstrike, too." Sunstrike was a Dark Forest trainee- surely she would fight for the Dark Forest?

Branchear attacked a little too soon, racing towards Gorsetail and stumbling over a half-hidden rock. Snowtuft saw Twigleap roll his eyes, coming over to drag Ashfoot off his brother. The two siblings tussled with the rest of the patrol before Twigleap broke away, haring towards the tree and flicking his tail over Branchear's nose to signal him to do the same. *Yes!* Snowtuft's muscles tensed.

Once Leaftail was directly beneath him, Snowtuft dropped, landing on the dark ginger tabby tom's back. Leaftail let out a yelp and his legs collapsed as Snowtuft deftly hooked them from under his paws. Churning his hind paws on the WindClan tom's spine, Snowtuft was about to sink his teeth into Leaftail's neck when fangs sank into his shoulder and dragged him off, landing a hard blow on Snowtuft's nose.

He rolled and scrambled up, coming face-to-face with Sunstrike. "What are you doing? Fight for the Dark Forest, mouse-brain!" He hissed. But the tortoiseshell she-cat stood her ground, her pale amber eyes shining with fear and defiance. "No! I will never harm my Clanmates."

"Traitor!" Snowtuft lunged for the treacherous she-cat, but a paw knocked him backward, and he staggered. Sunstrike was strong from the lessons in the Dark Forest- lessons that had been a complete waste of time.

But Snowtuft was practically oblivious to pain. As Branchear pushed Leaftail away, his whole attention was on the WindClan warrior. He feinted to one side, then swiftly switched to the other, fastening his teeth onto Sunstrike's shoulder and tearing. Blood gushed out like a waterfall, and the tortoiseshell she-cat cried out in pain, lashing out with one paw.

Snowtuft flinched as it tore into his ear, but threw himself forward, both paws slashing across Sunstrike's chest. *No mercy.*

The traitor crumpled to the ground, kicking out, but Snowtuft dodged it easily and pinned Sunstrike to the grass. Her breath came out in ragged gasps, and blood trickled from her chest. *Too easy.* But as his paw darted out to deal the death blow, Sunstrike suddenly reared up, sinking her teeth into his outstretched paw. Snowtuft let out a shocked yelp and kicked out brutally, making her let go with a wordless yowl of agony.

"Now you understand pain. And you deserve it." Snowtuft brought down a paw and sliced slowly, satisfaction filling him from paws to tail-tip at the sight of bright red blood welling at Sunstrike's throat.

The tortoiseshell she-cat didn't even have the chance to whimper before she fell limp, her amber eyes clouded over.

Snowtuft leaned closer to the dead she-cat. "Now you know what we do to those who betray us."

16 (THEN)

The first light of dawn shone into the ShadowClan camp. Silverlight began to call injured cats into her den, but Mudstar raised his tail. "Before Silverlight begins treating, I have two ceremonies to perform-" he broke off, coughing harshly. Cherrycloud limped to the ShadowClan leader's side, but he shook her off determinedly.

"ThunderClan's invasion was very sudden. But we won in a way. And because I have been sick for quite some time, the apprentice ceremony for Honeyshine's kits has been delayed. So, Barkkit, Brightkit and Coldkit, step forward."

"Great StarClan!" Honeyshine dashed forward and frantically started to lick her ruffled kits. "You can't pull this surprise on us, Mudstar!" The kits' father, Cedartail, also dragged himself forward, his amber eyes gleaming with pride. He pressed his cheek to the yellow-and-white she-cat's. "It's fine, Honeyshine. Let Mudstar continue."

The three kits scampered to the black-and-brown tom and Mudstar continued, his yellow eyes shining with amusement. "Barkpaw, your mentor will be Patchleaf. He is young but strong, and will teach you how to fight the strongest warriors. Brightpaw, yours shall be Flamestripe. Flamestripe is an extremely skilled hunter, and both of you burn with the same fire. Lastly, Coldpaw, your mentor will be Gingershadow. It is rare for kin to mentor kin, as Gingershadow is the elder sister of Honeyshine, and you were named after her mate, after all. But she is experienced, and a younger presence may soften her grief."

"Barkpaw! Brightpaw! Coldpaw!" Snowpaw chanted alongside his Clan dully. Once, he would have been one of the first to bound forward and congratulate the new apprentices, but now he hung back as the touched noses with their mentors.

Mudstar cleared his throat. "And the second ceremony. Snowpaw and Frostpaw have fought bravely in the battle, and I especially commend Snowpaw, whom I know Slatepetal would have been

proud of. Blazemist, I think you can say the same for Frostpaw too." The ginger-and-white tom bowed his head.

"Then step forward.I, Mudstar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn. Snowpaw, Frostpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Frostpaw's mew was at least an octave higher than Snowpaw's, who hesitated before speaking. Shredpaw, Tearpaw and Fleapaw rolled their eyes, though no cat noticed.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your names. Frostpaw, from now on your name shall be Frostwing. StarClan honours your loyalty and patience, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan. Snowpaw-" "Wait," Snowpaw blurted out. Gasps resounded around the Clan and Gingershadow's tail bushed.

"I would like to choose my own name, after Slatepetal. I wish to be named Snowslate." Snowpaw was barely aware of anything but the blood roaring in his ears as he stared coldly back at Mudstar.

Compassion flashed into the old tom's eyes. "I understand that you miss your mentor- Slatepetal will be missed for moons to come. But I will not allow your name to always remind you of your fallen mentor, for I know that you will hold on to your grief. I do not wish that. So, by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Snowpaw, your name shall be Snowtuft, and StarClan honours your courage and intelligence, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

"Frostwing! Snowtuft!" The Clan acclaimed, but Snowtuft felt no joy. His knees trembled as he staggered to the body of his mentor and he pushed his nose deep into her spotted gray fur. "No... no! I failed you, Slatepetal. I could have kept your name alive, your legacy alive..." His voice cracked.

But a small voice at the back of his mind peeped out. *It's not too late. Slatepetal wanted everything to be perfect- ShadowClan to be the*

best. And I can do it... With Batear's help.

First things first- destroying ThunderClan.

17 (THEN)

"You're sure that you don't need rest? You'll be losing sleep for two nights," Tearpaw fretted, her amber eyes shadowed with concern for Snowtuft. "No, it's fine." Snowtuft kept his gaze trained forward. *Why is she so worried about me?* Glancing briefly back at the gray-and-white she-cat, Snowtuft glimpsed a faint hurt look, as if she had taken his rejection to rest personally.

That day had been... eventful wasn't the word. But Snowtuft had seen the way Frostwing acted around Cindersmoke during a patrol, keeping close to the gray tabby tom and purposefully making their fur brush together. Cindersmoke was also shy around Frostwing- the young warrior was usually quite outspoken and unafraid to show what he thought.

At first, Snowtuft had thought that it was just a crush, and Frostwing would jolt back to her factual sense. But when his sister only wanted to share prey with Cindersmoke- a rabbit, which she pretty much hated- cats began to notice, and of course they started to gossip. But Snowtuft didn't ask, nor did he care- they were not siblings anymore, according to O Great Frostwing. But anyway, he didn't care at all. And the darkness in his heart wreathed, trying to take over his whole mind. But the last bit remained, and that last bit was connected to Gingershadow.

Shredpaw let Fleapaw and Tearpaw lead, dropping behind to walk beside Snowtuft. He shot the older tom a teasing glance. "Not flirting with Tearpaw yet?" "No way!" Snowtuft rolled his eyes, thinking that the dark brown tom was just teasing, as many friends did. But Shredpaw shrugged, pity showing in his yellow eyes as he shot a glance at Tearpaw

"What are you saying?" Snowtuft lowered his voice as Tearpaw glanced back and avoided her eyes, though he felt her gaze searing into his fur for a moment before she turned back. It would certainly explain her behaviour to me, though...

"You see? She likes you, obviously." Shredpaw's tone was serious and almost with a hint of envy. Snowtuft struggled to see why his best friend was urging him. "I don't get it. Why would she? And I honestly don't want a mate."

Shredpaw rolled his eyes. "Seriously? Well, I'm just going to let the two of you sort it out." He quickened his pace, and Snowtuft was happy to let him.

Soon, they arrived at the clearing where Snowtuft had first met Batear. The big black-and-white tom was already there with a cross expression on his face. Snowtuft instinctively shrank back, but the other three apprentices padded forward nonchalantly, and he forced himself to follow them, holding his head high.

"Greetings, Blackear." Fleapaw dipped his head respectfully. "Welcome back. Why were you three not here last meeting? And is this Snowpaw here too?" Batear's voice betrayed absolutely nothing. "There was a battle caused by ThunderClan. And they attacked because of you, didn't they? And Snowtuft wanted to be here." Tearpaw's tail-tip twitched.

Batear chuckled darkly. "Oh yes, them. Quite fun to watch them so frustrated-" "You killed my mentor!" Snowtuft spat, coming forward to stand beside the apprentices. Rage boiled in his blood as he glared at the former ShadowClan warrior.

"So now you care about ShadowClan? The last time you were here, you might've been thinking of destroying them." Batear's voice was dangerously quiet, but Snowtuft didn't care. He stalked forward, his tail lashing in the air. "I pretty much only cared about Slatepetal, the day before the battle. But ThunderClan killed her. Frostwing threw away our kinship after I killed Leopardleap- now I just have Gingershadow that I'm close to." Raw pain edged Snowtuft's mew.

Batear inclined his head. "You can't expect me to say that I'm sorry for your loss. But ranting to me wasn't what you came here for, was it?"

Snowtuft steadied his breath. "No. I want to destroy ThunderClan- get revenge."

Gasps came from Tearpaw, Shredpaw and Fleapaw. Batear's pale green eyes widened. The rogue cats behind him broke out in a chatter, while Fenneldust and a few others growled their approval. Snowtuft gazed around at the circle of cats, trying not to let his paws tremble as he waited for Batear to say something. *I've done it.* He felt giddy.

The black-and-white tom lifted his tail, signaling for silence. "Well. That was unexpected, but it can be done, if you're sure." "I'm sure that I want revenge," Snowtuft snarled back aggressively. "Very well. Then after tonight, I need you four to meet at the next quarter moon, half moon and four days after half moon to discuss. Is that okay?"

"Of course!" Shredpaw bounced on his paws. "Very well. If you cannot make it, at least one of you must find a way to inform us. And well, Fenneldust, I suppose you're pleased." "Very," the light brown tabby she-cat purred, her voice rich.

"Alright. So first things first- when we attack, who we aim for, how to ensure that they will not bring reinforcements. And we can start with a spy in ThunderClan. Rip and Moose, both of you can do. Find a way for them to accept you two, and be here the same time as the four of them." "Sure!" The two cats, black as night, chorused together. Moose was Rip's mother, after all.

"Let's start with when we attack... any ideas?"

18 (NOW)

"I'm no traitor! I've been loyal to my Clan all along! I only came to the Dark Forest to find out what you were planning!" A hiss came from a side. Snowtuft whipped around to see Ivypool facing Thistleclaw, her silver-and-white tabby fur bristling as the ragged tom glowered at her. *I knew it! Right from the beginning!*

He saw Hawkfrost approach the two of them, and stalked towards their direction too, betrayal and hate making his belly roil. *How dare she? Tigerstar, Brokenstar, Hawkfrost... they all trusted her so much. Even Mapleshade had trusted this treacherous spy!*

"I won't fight for you either!" A light brown tabby tom flung himself onto Ragespirit, a dark gray-black tabby tom with bright green eyes. Ragespirit snarled and struck out a blow which the light brown tabby tom dodged easily. Applefur, a ShadowClan recruit, lunged for Tearstone. "I fight for the Clans!" She bowled her over while Tearstone scrabbled at the mottled brown she-cat's belly, scattering tufts of fur.

"Then we shall kill you first, before we destroy your wretched Clans!" Rage flared in Hawkfrost's ice-blue gaze and his tail lashed.

Speak less, act more! Snowtuft threw his full weight onto Ivypool, piercing his claws through her flank. He felt the ThunderClan she-cat stiffen before she sprawled on the grass. But she was skilful, at least, jumping quickly to her paws and hurling herself at Snowtuft, who was too slow to react. He felt her claws hook into his shoulders and hauling him backward, but he twisted, snapping at her neck. *Traitors must die!* To his disappointment, Ivypool managed to dodge, but crashed into a dark tabby pelt. *Tigerheart.*

"Do I have to fight you, too?" Snowtuft heard Ivypool snarl, and his lip twisted at how the silver-and-white tabby she-cat's words were edged with fear. They didn't need help, but with Tigerheart helping it might convince Ivypool that the Clans were doomed...

Tigerheart's amber eyes narrowed, and his broad shoulders tensed as his gaze darted to Ivypool, then the Dark Forest warriors. Come on! Just kill her. Snowtuft found himself urging the dark brown tabby tom. But the young ShadowClan tom growled, "I'm a warrior. I fight for the Clans." Before Snowtuft had time to register yet another betrayal, Tigerheart turned and kicked out violently, sending Thistleclaw sprawling. "Dark Forest warriors don't belong here. This is Clan territory." Tigerheart fixed his glare at Snowtuft, who felt a shadow of his mouse-hearted self threaten to take over.

Three against two. We can still win this! Snowtuft turned on Ivypool, baring his teeth, but the lithe ThunderClan she-cat was quicker, thrusting him away. Snowtuft winced as he felt his fur being ripped. "Then why were you in the Dark Forest?" Ivypool called to Tigerheart- as if it was a Gathering, not in the midst of a massive battle.

"Same as you. I wanted to find out what they were up to." Tigerheart ducked under Thistleclaw's belly, dodging whirring claws, and shoved the dark gray-and-white warrior off balance. Snowtuft gritted his teeth. *Traitors. Perhaps even plotting together. Was the Dark Forest all just a joke to them?*

"But you're Tigerstar's kin!" Thistleclaw protested, rounding on the dark brown tabby tom that was like a mirror image of one of the strongest leaders of the Dark Forest. Thistleclaw's amber eyes flashed with rage and his shoulder fur was bristling.

"That doesn't mean that I have to be like him. He almost destroyed ShadowClan once before. I won't let him do it again!" Tigerheart swiped at Thistleclaw's muzzle but missed. Snowtuft gaped at the dark brown tabby tom. *Who doesn't want to be like Tigerstar? You don't deserve to be his kin.* His blood ran cold.

Hawkfrost let out a roar of pure fury, barging past Thistleclaw with his nostrils flaring. "I'll finish this traitor off. You and Snowtuft deal with Ivypool." He hurled himself at Tigerheart and the two toms wrestled together in a mess of dark brown tabby fur.

Gladly. Without hesitation, Snowtuft whirled and sliced his claws through Ivypool's shoulders, letting blood gush out. The silver-and-

white tabby stumbled sideways, her legs buckling as Thistleclaw hooked them out. Snowtuft reared, feeling Thistleclaw do the same at his side. Adrenaline pumped through his body as he swung blow after blow at Ivypool's muzzle, in rhythm with the older Dark Forest tom.

The ThunderClan warrior raised her forelegs, trying to fend off the brutal strikes, but her hind legs slipped. Ivypool tripped and fell in a jumble of legs. *Now!* Snowtuft lunged, but was disconcerted when Ivypool managed to leap out of the way just in time. The silver-and-white she-cat looked around and Snowtuft felt somewhat pleased upon seeing panic flare into her dark blue eyes. They had separated her from the others. *No one can save you now, traitor.*

Thistleclaw caught his eye, and they began forcing Ivypool back, hurling ruthless blows at her, driving the tabby she-cat deeper and deeper into the heather. Snowtuft glanced in front and saw gorse bushes coming into view. They could trap Ivypool there.

He dropped onto all fours and stared into Ivypool's terrified eyes. Thistleclaw also paused, panting. Ivypool whipped around, alarm flashing into her dark blue eyes as she searched for an escape route. Snowtuft enjoyed the crushed look, the defeated look on the silver-and-white she-cat when Thistleclaw yowled, "We've trapped her!"

Hawkfrost strode into the tiny clearing, startling Snowtuft. He hadn't even noticed that the senior warrior was there, too. "Did you really think you'd live after betraying me?" His ice-blue eyes shone as the dark brown tabby tom glanced at Thistleclaw and Snowtuft, but Snowtuft glimpsed a little hurt in them. He also noticed that Hawkfrost had said 'me' instead of 'us' or 'the Dark Forest'.

"Let's make her death slow," Hawkfrost growled, and lunged at Ivypool, throwing her backward with such force that Snowtuft was amazed. While the silver-and-white tabby she-cat was still gasping for air, Snowtuft raked his claws across her spine and grabbed her scruff in his teeth while Hawkfrost and Thistleclaw ripped at her pelt with teeth and claws.

Without warning, Ivypool reared up with a roar, as strong as a badger. Snowtuft felt himself lose his hold and was flung off, but

managed to twist deftly and land on four paws, staggering a little. "I trained you too well," Hawkfrost snarled at Ivypool, his gaze trained on her throat. Snowtuft willed the Dark Forest tom to attack.

Ivypool backed away from the menacing warrior, twisting and ducking under Hawkfrost when he leaped. But Hawkfrost, being as clever as usual, used his claws to pin her tail and hold her to the ground. Snowtuft attacked with Thistleclaw, slicing her ears and snarling furiously. Ivypool struggled away but crashed into Hawkfrost, who stabbed thorn-sharp claws into the she-cat's shoulders. Snowtuft saw Thistleclaw's jaws close around her throat.

Then a black pelt flashed on top of the gorse. Paws landed with a thump as Hollyleaf yowled, "Get off her!" She slammed into Hawkfrost, sending him reeling into the thorns. What? No... not another warrior! Exhaustion seemed to weigh on Snowtuft suddenly, and pain burned in his muscles as soon as Ivypool turned on him and Thistleclaw, slashing with her front paws skilfully.

Snowtuft dodged and lashed out, but Ivypool struck out at Snowtuft's muzzle, slicing it. The silver-and-white tabby she-cat tore Thistleclaw's nose, knocking the gray-and-white tom backward with a strong kick of her back legs.

Snowtuft flung out a desperate paw, but Ivypool knocked it away as if she were just batting away a fly and sank her teeth into his neck. Agony burst, sharp as thorns, as Snowtuft screeched and tore himself away.

I can't... Shame heating his ears, he lowered his head and hared away into the bracken, not wanting to think about what the other Dark Forest cats would say about him.

I don't know if we can win anymore! Staring at the mass of cats fighting, blood being spilt... the Clan cats working together. Their attacks were well-coordinated, and despite their lack of the more advanced fighting techniques, the WindClan cats- and those of other Clans- never gave up despite so many wounds. Whereas wherever Snowtuft looked, Dark Forest cats were fleeing, or some even being defeated.

A hollow feeling settled in his chest, and Snowtuft instinctively knew who would win the war.

19 (THEN)

"Mudstar, this may be strange... but I would like to go out with Fleapaw, Tearpaw and Shredpaw today." Snowtuft shifted his paws uneasily, fishing for words.

Three days had passed since the meeting with Batear, and there were two days left before the quarter moon. Snowtuft hadn't gotten to speak with the three apprentices- they were all busier than ever after the battle with ThunderClan. But now, they were sharing a plump pigeon at the fresh-kill pile, and the sun had just rose. Snowtuft wanted to get Mudstar's permission before Ashtail, Goldpelt and Silkclaw woke up.

Mudstar looked up, a question in his weary yellow eyes. "Why? You are a bit young to start thinking about mentoring." *Trust Mudstar to be so blunt.* And yet Snowtuft wasn't surprised- Mudstar was the kind of cat that simply said what was on his mind, and didn't care about what the other cat thought. It was sometimes admirable, but yet could be annoying- like now. Snowtuft flinched as if the brown-and-black tom had struck him.

"Uh." Snowtuft fumbled for a reason. "Ashtail was coughing a little yesterday, and maybe Goldpelt and Silkclaw might want to take a break and rest, too? Besides, I brought them into the Clan- I want to see what I did, how I helped ShadowClan... if I did." The part about Ashtail coughing was true, though it was probably some dust after helping to fix a portion of the medicine-cat den.

"Ah." Mudstar's eyes glinted, and Snowtuft looked away- he knew that he was a terrible liar. But the ShadowClan leader swished his tail, seemingly unperturbed by why Snowtuft would lie. "I don't see why not. I will tell them about it, and you can go tell Fleapaw, Shredpaw and Tearpaw. You are taking them for the whole day?"

Snowtuft glanced at his paws. "I guess. Unless the mentors want to take them for the afternoon," he muttered. The patchy tom simply nodded, his gaze drifting away, and mumbled something inaudible.

Snowtuft let out an inward sigh- since the battle, the ShadowClan leader had sometimes 'zoned out', not focusing things and mumbling incoherent things under his breath. It was as if the old leader was preparing himself for StarClan already.

Taking that as his sign to leave, Snowtuft turned and padded away. Tearpaw glanced up immediately, her amber eyes lighting up. Shredpaw cast a sidelong glance at Snowtuft. Fleapaw's tail twitched from side to side. Snowtuft's fur prickled along his neck uncomfortably at the expectant looks the toms gave him. It's as if we're already mates!

"Mudstar granted me permission to have you three for the day," he announced briskly, without looking at the gray-and-white she-cat. "What? How about our mentors?" Fleapaw looked dubious, as if Snowtuft was telling a very elaborate joke.

Snowtuft snorted. "Out of the way." Fleapaw opened his mouth to say something else, but something about the white tom's expression warned the gray-and-brown tom to not do so. He dropped his gaze, and Snowtuft felt a twinge of satisfaction- a very rare feeling for him. "We need to talk," he continued, lowering his voice.

As soon as the pigeon was finished, Snowtuft led the three cats out of camp, towards a thick cluster of pines outside ShadowClan territory. He made sure that they all waded past a small stream- it would help to mask their scent, and the thickly massed woods would muffle their mews. Shredpaw glanced nervously back, his tail slightly bushed. "What is it about?"

"Remember our plans?" Snowtuft sat down and curled his tail over his paws. They all exchanged glances. Of course they remembered. "Now, we have to think about how ThunderClan cats nearly won, if not for Mudstar."

"Ashdream and Softwhisper climbed onto the medicine-cat den and dropped down onto Cherrycloud, who was busy battling Fogpetal," Tearpaw recalled. Snowtuft winced slightly. Deputy against deputy... Fogpetal was well-known for her speed. And for two warriors to join... as if Cherrycloud didn't have enough to handle!

"So. Tree-climbing, isn't it?" Fleapaw guessed, giving a paw a lick. Snowtuft nodded, his eyes gleaming. "Spot-on, Fleapaw. Yes. To win over the enemy, we must know how they fight, and overcome them."

"Don't ShadowClan cats already know how to climb?" Shredpaw tilted his head, looking confused. "We know the basics." "Uh... we don't really know how to." Snowtuft and Tearpaw spoke at the same time, making the dark brown tom even more bewildered. "I did that when I was like, four moons old!"

"Really? Show how you attack Fleapaw, then." Snowtuft pushed the gray-and-brown tom forward, and retreated to watch them.

First, Shredpaw darted up the pine tree like a squirrel, surprising Snowtuft. Even ShadowClan cats, however experienced, could not do that. Fleapaw's amber eyes were on his denmate, fixed intently on the agile dark shape slipping through the branches.

Shredpaw paused near the top of the tree, then met the gray-and-brown tom's gaze. Then, Shredpaw dropped directly, aiming for Fleapaw's head. But once the other apprentice darted out of the way, Shredpaw flung out his front paws and held on to a thick branch close to the ground, kicking out viciously at Fleapaw. His hind paws caught the side of Fleapaw's head and threw him off balance. Fleapaw stumbled, nearly crashing into Snowtuft.

While the gray-and-brown apprentice was winded, Shredpaw had dropped down and pinned Fleapaw down, with one paw at his throat. "Like that," he finished, staring around the group of stunned cats.

Snowtuft was the first to recover. He strode to the centre. "Well, well. Now we know what to do, don't we? Shredpaw, let's see how you did it."

They practiced until sunhigh, and by then, all of them had nearly mastered the move.

Snowtuft grinned.

20 (THEN)

"Snowtuft. Come on patrol with me and Ashtail." Gingershadow poked her head into the warriors' den. Snowtuft, who had just settled into his nest for a nap, rolled his eyes. "Can't it wait?"

"No. I have to tell you something." Gingershadow's face was uncharacteristically nervous, even with hints of excitement. Snowtuft let out a long sigh that ruffled his whiskers. Tomorrow night, it would be quarter moon, and he would have to sneak out again. *And I was hoping to get some rest now to prepare for a sleepless night!*

Reluctantly, he dragged himself out and followed the dark ginger she-cat outside. Ashtail walked by her side, and Frostwing was pacing outside. The afternoon sun blazed down- most cats would be either lazing on the flat rocks or inside, sheltering from the blistering sun and taking a well-earned nap. But instead, Snowtuft was stuck with his kin and his former mentor's brother, a combination that he did not appreciate. *Great StarClan, has Gingershadow grown mouse-brained?We should be taking a break now, and she has to take even that away?* He thought irritably, although he didn't hate his mother. Not exactly.

Not yet.

They stopped at a small clearing where apprentices learned their basic tree-climbing moves. Pine trees, with low-reaching branches and others reaching high up into the sky, towered above them. Snowtuft was thankful for the shade, but wondered why they had stopped. Gingershadow sat down heavily and leaned against a pine, and Ashtail followed, pressing his striped gray fur to hers and propping her up.

Snowtuft stiffened immediately, and saw Frostwing's ear twitch and her leaf-green eyes widen. That was something mates did. Cedartail and Honeyshine, Cherrycloud and Blackheart... what was Ashtail doing? And Gingershadow looked so tired! *What is going on?*

"What..." Frostwing's voice trailed off as Gingershadow began to speak, her voice strangely breathless. "Snowtuft, Frostwing... my beloved kits. You've only had each other for so long, and yet you don't appreciate kinship anymore. I'm not blind- I've noticed everything going on. But if the two of you aren't going to resolve your differences, I will."

How? Snowtuft and Frostwing swapped hostile glances, though their grudge was blurred by confusion. Neither of the siblings knew what the dark ginger she-cat meant.

Ashtail took over, his sky-blue eyes blazing with some kind of fierce, proud joy. "Gingershadow is expecting kits, you two. And both of you will care for them, as your siblings." He glanced back towards Gingershadow, and Snowtuft saw affection warming his mother's gaze. Suddenly, he understood, and by the look on his former sister's face, she did, too.

Frostwing took a step back, her white fur fluffed out as if confronting an enemy. "Gingershadow... you're mates with Ashtail? Why didn't you tell us? And..." "What about Coldheart?" Snowtuft interjected, his voice harsh with disbelief. *My mother. She cheated on our father. Doesn't Gingershadow love Coldheart anymore, even though he's dead? Did she ever?*

Snowtuft's thoughts spiralled so fast that he missed Gingershadow's reply. And he didn't want to know what it was. "You never loved Coldheart! You may think siblings will make us bond, but you're wrong! Ashtail can never replace Coldheart."

With that, he fled, not even caring about what they would say behind their back."Snowtuft, wait!" It sounded like Ashtail. "Come back!" Frostwing's yowl was sharp. "No! You- all of you- are not my family. You were never my family... you never cared for me." Snowtuft shouted back, his voice cracking. *I was always alone...*

He didn't know if they heard him. But his paws led him on autopilot, and he found himself at the ShadowClan border. A bit more and he would be on Batear's territory. He desperately wanted to, but he knew that the group of rogues condoned no form of weakness.

So he drew to one side and dug a small hole at one of the roots of an old tree. Weak sunlight filtered through, but none reached the secluded spot Snowtuft had chosen. The chill reached his bones, the tendrils of ice shivering towards his heart.

And he let them. He let darkness take over. And curled up, sobs racking his skinny body as he replayed the betrayal. The lost hope echoing in his mind.

But Snowtuft would rise again, stronger, more vengeful. His eyes were opened to the reality, unlike the snake-hearts he used to call kin.

21 (NOW)

"Flee, Dark Forest scumbags!" The warriors of WindClan taunted behind Snowtuft. Agony, mixed with rage, surged in his chest. *If only our trainees hadn't betrayed us!* So many of them had. Sunstrike, Harespring, Ivypool, Applefur, Birchfall, Blossomfall, Tigerheart, Larkpaw... and even Whiskerpaw, whom Snowtuft had spent moons training. All traitors. Only Breezepelt had stayed to fight against WindClan for a while, but in the end, he had too turned on the Dark Forest.

Snowtuft felt his paws sink into the slushy ground of the Dark Forest. The remaining cats split up, swallowed by the mist. Snowtuft slunk away, his tail down and head throbbing with humiliation. He knew that he would never interact with the others again- perhaps never even see them again. But who cared? They were outcasts anyway, even here.

But there was a hollow feeling in his chest. He knew that Shredtail had died fighting Lionblaze in the ShadowClan camp, somehow. His best friend for so many moons, dead. Fighting a warrior from ThunderClan. As for Fleawhisker and Tearstone, he didn't know. Maybe because he never had much of a connection with the two siblings. Ripclaw died right in front of Snowtuft at the claws of Heathertail and Crowfeather. So that was two loyal friends gone, just like that.

The mist closed behind him, and he heard more noises, probably the others coming back from defeat. He did not hear Hawkfrost, Brokenstar or Tigerstar. Amongst all the senior warriors, only Thistleclaw and Mapleshade returned, cursing at the others. *Mapleshade is probably going to fade soon, anyway.*

He drew his tongue over his wounds, rasping over the long scar- his near-death battle wound. He recalled Shredtail and him talking after that training session as if it had just happened the previous day, and let out a long sigh. *So long, old friend.*

Snowtuft was unaware of whatever time ticked past. Time travelled differently, anyway. But the sounds died away, and Snowtuft paced around, all alone. He welcomed the ache of loneliness in his heart, wreathed in memories of his two lost friends, and the other two unknown. Perhaps they were dead, too. Or maybe they were alive?

"Snowtuft? Is that you?" A voice echoed from the rotting bracken, and Snowtuft spun around. It sounded like Tearstone. "Tearstone? Where are you?" "I don't know. Where are you? I thought I heard you sigh." Yes, definitely the gray-and-white she-cat.

"Are you dead?" Snowtuft was half afraid of the answer, but still pricked his ears. A pause. "No. I survived." But there was no triumph in the scarcely audible answer; it sounded hollow with despair. Snowtuft had to strain to hear Tearstone's next words. "The mist is growing thicker around here, Snowtuft. I've got to go."

"Wait!" Snowtuft yowled, but it echoed through the trees.

No answer came to him. Tearstone had left, and Snowtuft was once again on his own.

It's like the time when I first came, he mused, sitting down and wrapping his tail around his paws. We can hear and scent each other, but no matter how hard we search, we just can't find that cat.

Am I happy about that? Snowtuft was pretty sure that he wasn't. He had explored many more places when with others, and was used to the sounds of battle practice ringing in the damp air. But this silence made him shiver, not with fear or cold. It was purely discomfort.

Will I ever see any others? Or will I just fade away, like Mapleshade? He didn't know the answer to that one, and wanted to find it.

But it turned out that the answer would find him.

22 (THEN)

"So... you aren't going to talk about what happened? Why you're so distant now?" Shredpaw pressed. Snowtuft couldn't feel grateful for his friend's concern. "If you have eyes, you will be able to see that Gingershadow is in the nursery with a swollen belly. And if you can see that, you will know that she is expecting kits that are not my siblings," he snapped at the dark brown tom, whose yellow eyes rounded.

It's so obvious! And yet every cat is asking me what's wrong... as if they can't see the betrayal to Coldheart, their former deputy! Right in front of their faces! If Mudstar had any sense, he would throw Gingershadow out... as he should. Snowtuft felt anger warm him from nose to tail-tip, despite the leaf-fall chill that was setting in.

The quarter moon shone in the sky, occasionally being obscured by dense clouds that scuttled into its path. The time to meet with Batear had come again, and Snowtuft was itching to get there. After ThunderClan was destroyed, ShadowClan would be next. WindClan and RiverClan... well, Snowtuft didn't have grudges with them, so he dismissed the other two Clans. One skinny, one fat... absolutely no use!

The journey was quiet, and they soon arrived in the mossy clearing. Batear, halfway through washing his ears, looked mildly surprised. "My, you four are so silent today. What's up? Not gossiping as usual?" Fleapaw opened his mouth to say something, but a look from Snowtuft made him snap his jaws shut.

Just then, Rip and Moose appeared, or whatever their names were. "News?" Fenneldust padded from the ferns, her amber eyes narrowed with interest.

Rip's light blue eyes were glowing, evidently not having picked up the tense air from the ShadowClan cats. "Great so far! I became Rippaw and Moose is now Moosecloud- she's too old to be an apprentice, anyway. ThunderClan is really trusting- they didn't even

give us a trial!" The small black tom rolled his eyes.

Moosecloud prodded her son. "Tell them about Orangepaw and Palepaw." "Oh, them. The two annoying furballs who think I'm only six moons old while they're eleven. I wish some cat would tell them that I'm fifteen moons old already!" Rippaw let out an irritated growl and his tail lashed once.

"Moosecloud?" Batear addressed the ThunderClan cats for the first time. The black she-cat started, then twitched an ear. "I'm making some friends- to use them, of course. As Rippaw said... ThunderClan cats trust too easily. Make some friends and they'll stick up for you whether you actually like them or not. That's why I told Rippaw to be nicer to Thornpaw, the newest apprentice. And to Emberpelt's three kits too- Smokekit, Breezekit and Willowkit." "Don't get too friendly." There was an edge in Fenneldust's tone as her gaze turned as chilly as the wind.

Moosecloud backed away. "Of course not. But as you said, we need information. So Rippaw and I have thought of something."

"What is it?" Snowtuft spoke for the first time. He had thought that their original plan was already good enough! It was to attack four days after half moon, one of their dates previously used for discussion. Tearpaw's gaze was trained on the black she-cat.

"We attack at half-moon. The medicine cats would be out- perfect opportunity!" Rippaw's tail was twitching from side to side. Batear and Fenneldust exchanged a glance, and Batear let out a purr of amusement. "This generation was smarter than ours."

Snowtuft felt a stab of something- jealousy? He didn't want to be outdone. "Wait! I've got a better idea... we attack on full moon! More cats would be outside, and we can easily finish off the cats in ThunderClan."

Shredpaw and Tearpaw let out gasps of shock, and Fleapaw staggered back, his amber eyes wide. "Seriously? But it's the full-moon, and there's a truce!" The gray-and-brown tom protested. Rippaw and Moosecloud exchanged glances.

Snowtuft looked at Batear and Fenneldust, but their expressions gave nothing away. The message was clear: Elaborate. Until we fully agree, you're on your own. *Typical of rogues.*

"So what? If we're planning to destroy the Clans, we might as well undermine the warrior code. Who cares about it, anyway?" He let out a snort of derision and looked further, at the rogues clustered behind Batear and Fenneldust. "It's the main cause of suffering for most of us- exiled from the Clans due to the dictating of StarClan and the warrior code. They are just words meant to control us. So why shouldn't we attack on the full moon?"

"I agree!" Tearpaw's tail shot up and she shifted towards Snowtuft, who stiffened before their fur could touch. Shredpaw slowly nodded, and Fleapaw put in, "We don't even know where the truce is. At Fourtrees, or everywhere? Definitely not everywhere, because every heartbeat there's got to be a skirmish going on somewhere. So it's probably only at Fourtrees. And we aren't attacking Fourtrees, are we?"

Moosecloud looked thoughtful, while Rippaw simply shrugged. "Our loyalty is to you, Batear, no matter what happens."

"Well, Fleapaw, attacking Fourtrees is a great idea. Sadly, we aren't going to do that... yet. And I think Snowtuft's idea is extremely good- we attack at full moon. So, the next meeting is still half-moon, and that time is when we talk about when to attack. Good night, the six of you. Even rogues and loners need sleep, and so do you. Remember, you must come... or face the consequences."

The black-and-white tom always fancied theatrics.

23 (THEN)

"Any patrols planned for me?" Snowtuft questioned Cherrycloud. The cream-and-ginger she-cat tipped her head. "I thought that you could spend the day with Gingershadow. She has been coughing recently."

"I'm not a medicine cat!" Snowtuft fought to stop his neck fur from bristling, and regretted his sharp tone. The ShadowClan deputy looked taken aback, then shrugged. "Well, Frostwing asked to have her day off to spend time with Gingershadow, and I'd thought that you wanted the same. But since you don't, you can join Copperheart's patrol." She nodded at the dark ginger she-cat, whose patrol was almost ready to leave.

"Alright, Cherrycloud. Thanks." Not wanting to stay any longer, he hurried towards Copperheart. "Cherrycloud asked me to join."

"Okay." The dark ginger she-cat was never a talkative cat. Snowtuft fell in step with Silkclaw and Tearpaw. The gray-and-white she-cat immediately sidled up to him and they fell into pace- awkwardly for Snowtuft. Silkclaw flicked his tail looking subtly annoyed at his apprentice before quickening his pace to talk to Copperheart.

"So... Snowtuft, I was wondering if you like any she-cat," Tearpaw began hesitantly. Snowtuft didn't even spare a look at her. "No." The word came out colder than he intended, and the small she-cat flinched as if he had struck a blow at her.

The rest of the journey was silent. They marked the WindClan border but on the way back, Silkclaw flicked his tail against Tearpaw's shoulder. "We'll hunt before going back," the long-furred tom told Copperheart. "I'll hunt too," Snowtuft chimed in. Copperheart shrugged. "Okay."

Silkclaw hesitated when Snowtuft looked at him; the gray tabby tom was clearly unprepared for Snowtuft to have wanted to join them. "Snowtuft, do you want to join us or go on your own?" "You

can join us!" Silkclaw and Tearpaw spoke at the same time, then glanced at each other awkwardly.

"I'll hunt alone." Snowtuft didn't want to be with Tearpaw- he knew that being there would distract the small she-cat from her training. Besides, he had absolutely no interest in mentoring, unless he could become deputy.

Becoming deputy. Becoming leader.

A sudden pang of ambition took him by surprise as he padded away, ignoring the crushed look on Tearpaw's face. *Do I really want to be leader of ShadowClan?* In his heart, the answer was yes. ShadowClan was weak due to the sickly Mudstar, and Cherrycloud never felt right. *I would make a great leader of ShadowClan!*

He remembered that conversation with Nightwisp when she had been an apprentice. The black she-cat had scorned his caution for everything, calling it cowardice. So what if he had been so wary? It was for his safety, after all. Coldheart had died because he wasn't careful, Slatepetal had thrown herself to the death blow... all because they lived without fear.

But again, Snowtuft wasn't the cat he was before. Before, he was young, he was naive. But now... he craved battle. He wanted leadership thrown at his paws. He wanted revenge most of all. And was hungry for the scent of blood, flesh tearing under his claws...

The bracken rustled, making Snowtuft's ears prick. Without even getting ready, he pounced, trapping a mouse under his paws. It let out squeals, but that was exactly what Snowtuft longed for. The terror in his enemies' eyes...

He threw the small mammal onto the ground and sank his teeth slowly into the mouse's neck. The small, popping sounds of breaking bone. The satisfaction rippled throughout his whole body as he tore, warm blood filling his mouth.

Snowtuft blinked a couple of times, staring at the mouse's dead body, streaked with blood. Lifeless eyes staring up into the treetops. He could envision that being Gingerstrike too easily, dead at his

very own claws.

"You got that, Batear? I'm not the timid apprentice who strayed into your territory. I'm Snowtuft, who shall not give mercy to those who wrong me..."

24 (NOW)

Snowtuft choked as the white mist seemed to wrap excruciating tendrils around his throat. *What is happening?*

It all started when the white mist had started appearing some time ago. At first Snowtuft had ignored it, but as time lengthened, the white mist had spread even further. And he had begun to see other cats, too. But when Snowtuft had asked then about the mist, they had scoffed and said that it was nothing, and it hadn't spread at all- just Snowtuft's own imagination.

To try and prove them wrong, Snowtuft had fallen asleep right next to the white mist, shivering at the chill emitting from the pale gas. And when he woke up, the white mist had covered his entire body, and now it was as if he were suffocating.

I shouldn't have ever done that! But as Snowtuft began to fade- literally- into oblivion, strong jaws grasped his neck and hauled him out of the freezing nightmare. Snowtuft stood on his own four paws, panting and gasping for air.

When he had recovered, he saw an unfamiliar pale gray tom with darker flecks all over his fur. Being unfamiliar was normal, but there were two things out of place on this occasion. One was that the stranger had just saved Snowtuft's life- something that a Dark Forest cat would almost never do. Second was that there were stars dotting the gray tom's pelt and around his paws.

This was no Dark Forest cat. It was a StarClan cat, standing coolly on the Dark Forest grounds!

Snowtuft bared his teeth, unsheathing his claws. But the StarClan cat smirked, and there was almost something evil about it. *Evil in StarClan?* That thought held Snowtuft back and he narrowed his eyes.

"Oh, I wouldn't attack if I were you. I do have the power of StarClan

and the Dark Forest combined, you know. Besides, we will probably meet... soon."

And with that ominous note, the cat turned to leave. But Snowtuft, on impulse, called out. "What's your name, then?"

The pale gray tomcat paused and turned around slowly, a malicious light in his dark blue eyes. "It's Ashfur. But that will be of no use to you... at all."

Ashfur turned to leave again, and this time Snowtuft didn't stop him. Snowtuft turned around to head into the deeper woods when a growl halted him. "I hope you like my gift."

Whipping around, Snowtuft froze almost immediately. Where there had been a tunnel of earth that had mysteriously appeared some time ago had been blocked by vines and brambles. Was this Ashfur's 'gift'?

Snowtuft padded closer, his hackles high as he cautiously sniffed the barrier. He caught a sharp stone-like scent, mixed with freshwater. *Is that the scent of StarClan?*

Snowtuft tried to peek through the brambles, but ended up nearly poking his eye. "Unaccessible, then. But what did you mean by a 'gift'?" He mumbled to himself, thinking hard.

Snowtuft didn't know when he realised, but he understood at last.

Ashfur had created a tunnel from StarClan to the Dark Forest, and had now blocked it up. But then, what was the point?

Wait.

Then the actual connection from StarClan to the Dark Forest? It lay at the south of the Dark Forest, and during the preparation for the Great Battle, a cat would watch over it from two fox-lengths away, constantly rotated. But now that the Great Battle was over and there were no leaders of the Dark Forest, who was to watch over the connection? Has something happened to the connection passage?

Snowtuft wasn't really worried about the connection between StarClan and the Dark Forest; life would have been better if there wasn't. But there had to be a reason Ashfur dug a new one. The Dark Forest held evil, but this was the very first time that Snowtuft was unsettled by the amount of darkness radiating around a cat. *A cat from StarClan!* Definitely the first.

As he neared the patch of ground, he sniffed the air for scents- none, obviously. But he could detect something... The familiarity of the unwelcome scent hit Snowtuft like a blow. Extremely stale, yet it could be detected.

The scent of Ashfur.

Snowtuft pushed forward, relishing the fresh grass under his paws and the cleansed air. This was the only place in the Dark Forest that actually felt good, but scarcely any cat came here. Why? No cat wanted to be so close to the realm that had rejected them, and enjoying the luxury of this would make them feel even worse. When Tigerstar had ruled over the Dark Forest with Brokenstar and Mapleshade, they had declared the place off-bounds, a decision that Snowtuft was glad to follow.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Snowtuft hesitated before rounding a bend... and coming face-to-face with a wall of soil. "Great Tigerstar!" Snowtuft let out a yowl of shock. Previously, there would be a blinding tunnel of light, which only StarClan cats could pass through. But now... just this pile of soil. *What happened?*

Snowtuft was pretty sure that if he concentrated hard enough, it wouldn't be difficult to hear Ashfur chuckling to himself, sneering at the Dark Forest- and StarClan. *That cat is up to no good, that's for sure.*

25 (THEN)

On the day of the half-moon, Rippaw wasn't there. Instead, Moosecloud crashed through foilage, halting abruptly in front of Batear. "We got an idea." Her eyes were shining brighter than the moon shining overhead.

Batear's green eyes narrowed. "And you decided to do it before consulting me?"His tone was ominous, making Snowtuft's shoulders tense up. Moosecloud backed away- figuratively and literally. Those who had lived with the big black-and-white tom knew whenever their life could be on the line.

"I'm sorry, Batear. But we couldn't wait until now. Thorndawn died three days ago, so Rippaw had an idea to be apprenticed to Poppystream." "The medicine cat?" Tearstone, who had gotten her warrior name two days ago, exclaimed, her amber eyes rounding. Fenneldust's tail was twitching dangerously, and a growl rumbled in her throat.

"It's not what you think. As a medicine cat, we made a sign from StarClan to let Rippaw be a medicine cat apprentice. They're at the Moonstone doing it now. Then Rippaw will kill Poppystream, and when we attack ThunderClan-" "I see." Batear tipped his head to one side. "Leaving ThunderClan especially weak without a healer. Smart indeed."

Snowtuft's mind was whirring. Rippaw as a medicine cat? Unusual. But there seemed to be something... "Then won't Rippaw be at the Gathering when we attack?" He inquired.

Moosecloud seemed stumped by his question, but Batear answered it smoothly. "No. Rippaw will be in the ThunderClan camp." Batear's light green eyes had a light in them- an ominous one that made Snowtuft swallow the question that was creeping up his throat.

But Shredtail- previously Shredpaw- was far more daring than Snowtuft. "Batear, please enlighten us about what you just said."

Diplomatic... Snowtuft thanked the skies for his best friend's cautiousness that might've saved his lift.

"Very well. Don't be surprised by what my plan is. So Rippaw must go to the Gathering, because he's the new apprentice... but on three conditions. One is if he is sick, another is if he misbehaves that badly... and the last is if he's injured. So I have three plans, one for each condition." Every cat pricked their ears and leaned forward.

"The first is that we make Rippaw swallow yarrow. Marigoldflake, who has sadly left our group a season ago and has faced unfortunate ah... *natural* disasters, told us all about herbs. But anyway, yarrow will make a cat sick. However, as his mentor is a medicine cat, it might be simple for Poppystream to tell that he is faking it." Snowtuft's mouth twisted wryly. *Of course Marigoldflake died of natural disasters, didn't she? So probably not a certain group of rogues hunting her down and murdering her down, eh?*

"Secondly, Rippaw can *accidentally* stray onto ShadowClan land, where Snowtuft, Tearstone, Shredtail and Fleawhisker happen to *coincidentally* be hunting. They will take Rippaw back together with his *humongous* haul that was *definitely* caught by him alone and *not* all of them together. Then Amberstar would probably punish him." Chuckles rippled around the group, and even Snowtuft couldn't hide his amused grin at the heavily accented words. Batear's light green eyes had a glint in them as well.

"And my last idea is that Rippaw can go searching for herbs and *somehow* go over the border because of a newly scented patch of catmint, which will be needed in leaf-bare. He will be *so curious* that he goes over the border, and is attacked by a mysterious light brown tabby figure that is *totally* not Fenneldust. He gets injured- but not too injured, obviously- and goes back, where he shall whine about the pain and not go to the Gathering. So, what do you think?"

By this time, Shredtail, Tearstone and Fleawhisker's shoulders were shaking with laughter. Snowtuft's face was contorted in a grimace of self-control, while many others were outright giggling. Batear was smirking, pleased with his own humour. Finally, Moosecloud replied, "I think that we all agree, Batear. And to me, your second option works best."

"I agree with Moosecloud." It was the only option where it did not involve hurting Rippaw, and Snowtuft was delighted that he too had a part to play in this deception. One by one, the cats voted, and most were in favour of the second.

"Good. Snowtuft, Shredtail, Tearstone, Fleawhisker... I want to see the job done in two days."

26 (THEN)

"Snowtuft!" Cherrycloud called. Snowtuft halted abruptly, causing Fleawhisker to crash into him. The sun had just risen, and Snowtuft had arranged for Rippaw to go out soon. He'd been wishing to get the job over and done with quickly, but the ShadowClan deputy seemed to think otherwise...

"Mudstar fell ill in the night. Could you go with Ashtail and fetch some soaked moss? Tearstone and Fleawhisker, I want you two to go hunting with Cindersmoke and Frostwing. Shredtail, I'd thought that I had assigned you to patch up the nursery's wall? Leaf-fall is slowly turning to leaf-bare already, and I don't want Gingershadow to get cold when the winds come." *Why us?* Snowtuft used all his self-control to not lash his tail with frustration, and yet he saw the distrust in the cream-and-ginger she-cat's sky-blue eyes. The knowledge.

His heart stopped.

Cherrycloud knows. Snowtuft didn't need a confrontation to realise what was in front of his eyes. And based on the sudden apprehensive light in Shredtail's yellow eyes, he could tell that the dark brown tom had come to the same realisation, too.

Ashtail came out of the medicine den, the look on his face easygoing but worried. "Come on, Snowtuft. Mudstar's weakening." There was none of the suspicion in the dark gray tabby tom's tone nor in his sky-blue eyes, and Snowtuft exhaled softly. *Cherrycloud didn't tell any cat... yet. She's might do it soon, though.*

That's why I've got to get rid of her as quickly as possible. But this task is important as well... let's just hope that time is on our side for once.

Once he and Ashtail had headed into the woods, they collected moss from the usual place. Then Snowtuft pretended to hesitate before asking. "Ashtail, could you do me a favour?"

"What is it?" There was a slight wariness in his sky-blue eyes. Snowtuft took a deep breath. "You know, I've been feeling... a little stressed lately. Could you take this moss into camp while I hunt for a bit? I really need to clear my head. And could you please secretly tell my friends to meet me outside?" He added some desperation into his voice, and Ashtail thought for a moment.

"Okay. But in return, I want you to promise me that you'll treat Gingershadow's kits- my kits- as your own siblings. I know that your real family is quite broken right now, and I want you to try and fix it. Promise me that, and your request will be granted. That's all that I ask." *Seriously?* Snowtuft longed to roll his eyes. But he kept his feelings on guard. "Of course, Ashtail." He dipped his head to the dark gray tabby tom, who seemed to relax.

"Where should I tell your friends to meet you?" "At my favourite place," Snowtuft replied casually.

On the way to the ThunderClan border, Snowtuft caught two squirrels and a plump shrew, then waited patiently. It wasn't long before the sounds of cats crashing through the ferns signalled the arrival of Shredtail, Tearstone and Fleawhisker. "And you thought Ashtail could be trusted," Shredtail greeted him wryly. Snowtuft shrugged. "It was my best bet."

Tearstone laughed, dropping a wood pigeon with Snowtuft's haul. "You had Cherrycloud glowering at us and Ashtail all the way." "Speaking of Cherrycloud..." Shredtail's neck fur had spiked. "Yeah. She..." Fleawhisker trailed off, his tail twitching.

Snowtuft wanted to tell them about his plan, but just then, a new scent drifted towards them. Rippaw was making his way toward the four friends, two mice dangling from his jaws. "How do you hunt over here?" he complained, dropping them. "The scents of pine needles are everywhere!"

Tearstone smirked, running her tail along the young black tom's back. "Skill is all it takes. But I think we have enough, don't we? Rippaw, let's see how big your jaws are." Rippaw flashed sharp fangs at the gray-and-white she-cat. "Well, Tearstone. I was named for my amazing ripping skills anyway. And that takes strength in

the jaw."

Rippaw managed to fit both squirrels and a mouse before giving up. With Tearstone stifling giggles, Fleawhisker sighed in exasperation and grabbed the pigeon, shrew and the remaining mouse. "What a great thief you are. Ready to get into trouble?"

Rippaw nodded, his light blue eyes sparkling with a mix of anticipation and nervousness.

They let the black tom take the lead, with Shredtail fixing up Rippaw's face to look more convincing. "Tail between the legs! More shamefaced, Rippaw! And your eyes have to actually look guilty!" Snowtuft was happy to be at the back, practicing his stern look.

Soon, they reached the ThunderClan camp. Amberstar, who was standing beside Fogpetal, stiffened at the sight of the five cats. "Rippaw, where did all that prey come from? Poppystream's been looking for you! And why are there ShadowClan cats in my camp?"

Rippaw dropped his prey and glanced at the ground. Snowtuft growled, "We caught this apprentice inside our border, hunting our prey. We had the impression that he was a loner until he told us that he was ThunderClan." "Yeah. Is ThunderClan recruiting strays now?" Shredtail sneered.

"Enough!" Amberstar raised her tail, though Snowtuft could see that the calico she-cat was miffed by their remarks. "Rippaw, this is a serious violation of the warrior code. Why did you hunt on ThunderClan land?"

The black apprentice pawed at the soil. "I'm sorry, Amberstar. But Specklepatch died of starvation yesterday, and it isn't even leaf-bare! And Tinykit, Tawnystep's only kit, is slowly dying in Poppystream's den..." "Alright, that's enough." Amberstar's eyes flicked to Fleawhisker's pricked ears.

"Please tell Mudstar that ThunderClan apologises for this apprentice. I will see that he is punished appropriately." Amberstar gave them a courteous nod. "Okay. And Amberstar, Mudstar also wanted me to tell you that he advises you not to bring this... new

apprentice to the Gathering."

A flash of surprise glinted in her amber eyes. "Advising other leaders doesn't sound like Mudstar, but tell him that Rippaw won't be seen." She flashed the black tom another angry glance before turning back to the ShadowClan cats. "You may go now."

Once they were out of earshot, Shredtail's throat rumbled with a purr. "We sure did it." "Yeah." Snowtuft kept his gaze straight ahead. "Look, if we're seen going back to camp together, it might be weird. So how about you three hunt a bit on the WindClan border? I'll go back first."

"Sounds reasonable to me." Tearstone hared towards the opposite side, and Fleawhisker pelted after his sister. Only Shredtail lagged back for a moment. "I can tell that you're planning something, Snowtuft. But I'd guess that we'll all find out soon."

Snowtuft could only nod, his claws flexing in and out.

At camp, Cherrycloud's sky-blue eyes narrowed at the sight of Snowtuft. The cream-and-ginger she-cat stalked forward. "Snowtuft. I do need a word with you and your friends." "They wanted to stay out longer." Snowtuft kept his gaze steady.

"Oh. Then we can wait." "No need, Cherrycloud. I'll pass on the message. But should we talk outside? I have a feeling that what you want to say is rather private." Snowtuft's voice was coolly polite.

The deputy's eyes were slits now. "Very well, Snowtuft." She led the way to a secluded area behind the camp that even Snowtuft had never gone to before. Subconsciously, his claws slid out, sharp and deadly. *Cherrycloud can't continue to live... she knows too much.*

A flash, not even a single word uttered. The cream-and-ginger body slumped onto the ground, mouth still open in the scream that never came. Sky-blue eyes glazed, still full of fear. Blood matting the throat, clumping the fur as it dried.

Snowtuft stared at the corpse in front of him. "You wouldn't be here if you didn't know," he breathed softly. *My second kill.* He felt a little

dizzy, but managed to hold his self-control.

I need proof that it wasn't me. Luckily, Snowtuft had seen an abandoned fox den nearby. He headed inside, dragging Cherrycloud together with him, and dumped the ShadowClan deputy into the den.

Then, Snowtuft turned and pelted from the fox den, not looking back. It would be up to his Clanmates to try and find Cherrycloud. But as for now... he was safe.

Or so he thought.

27 (NOW)

Soon, Ashfur was sighted more and more often in the Dark Forest. Whispers about the flecked gray tom spread, and every cat withdrew into the shadows whenever the StarClan tom appeared, half fearful of what Ashfur was planning and half intrigued.

All was made known when Snowtuft heard a loud, booming voice echo to all the corners of the Dark Forest. "Those who are curious about Ashfur, please head to the training rock." The voice was familiar, and Snowtuft was almost swept back into the past by memories of the Great Battle. *Mapleshade! She's still alive!*

Knowing the Dark Forest by heart, he bounded towards the training rock where they used to hold meetings, setting his paws down on the ever so familiar trails. And soon, the damp bracken and ferns seemed to part and there lay... the training rock. And on top were two figures, so familiar that it made Snowtuft's heart ache.

"Mapleshade... Thistleclaw?" Snowtuft didn't know if he was happy to see the two great figures, but his voice evidently had an amazed edge to it, for Thistleclaw's tail flicked. "You thought that we were dead, eh? Snowtuft, sit below us, old friend."

Snowtuft's fur prickled. "Uh... I mean... no, Thistleclaw! I just haven't seen you in a while." "So you missed us, huh? Well, hurry up and come here. We don't have all night." There was a taunt in Mapleshade's mew, and Snowtuft hurried to sit at the bottom of the rock.

"Hey." Snowtuft nearly jumped as a familiar voice sounded in his ear. "Tearstone?" His voice came out as a whisper and he gazed at the gray-and-white she-cat. "Hi." She sounded hesitant, but Snowtuft had never been so glad to see her.

Just as he was trying to find words to express himself, Mapleshade let out another yowl. When the cats had quieted, the tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat rasped. "Welcome, cats of the Dark Forest. It has

been a long time since a meeting has been held. But today, we are gathered to discuss about a potential threat- or ally. I do believe that all of you have seen Ashfur, yes?"

Murmurs of assent. Then Thistleclaw added. "Then... friend or foe?"

Immediately, the clearing became ten times louder, until a ragged gray tabby tom stood up. "I believe that Ashfur is a foe. When has StarClan ever been a friend to us? Plus, I've felt him in my mind when we spoke- slithering, manipulating my mind. I cannot see any possible ally in that." As he spoke, his spirit faded in and out- he was Maggottail, one of the oldest cats alive in the Dark Forest.

Cats began to nod, but Houndleap, a black warrior from WindClan, spoke up. "I disagree with Maggottail. Ashfur came here probably to seek our help to fight against StarClan. There is no other reason. And as for the malevolent feeling... well, we're the Dark Forest for a reason, aren't we? We welcome evil, not stop it. Or we could use Ashfur to defeat StarClan somehow."

Mapleshade and Thistleclaw exchanged a look that Snowtuft knew too well; they agreed with Houndleap. But Snowtuft wanted to voice his opinion, too. "Wait! There was a white mist that began to surround us around the time Ashfur appeared. I nearly faded because I stayed in there. Ashfur might want to harm us with that."

To his dismay, Darkstripe, a dark gray tabby tom that had fought alongside Snowtuft in the Great Battle, rolled his eyes. "Snowtuft, stop jumping to conclusions. It could just be a coincidence, or something created by StarClan to destroy us." "Yes. Snowtuft, wait for your turn to speak." Thistleclaw glared down at him.

Snowtuft refused to be dismissed like that. "But Ashfur collapsed the connection with StarClan and created his own tunnel... then blocked the tunnel! We don't know what's he's plotting." He hated that it was so difficult to make his words have the meaning that Snowtuft intended.

Mapleshade chuckled darkly. "Oh, then he should be an ally. If he destroyed the connection with StarClan, we should honour him!" "But there must be a reason why there was a connection between us

and StarClan. What if something bad happens because we didn't take action?" A new voice piped up. Snowtuft saw Sparrowfeather standing on her toes, a worried expression on her mangled face.

Thistleclaw snorted. "What's the worst that could happen? So in conclusion to the meeting, us Dark Forest cats will think of Ashfur as an ally, and no more. Do I have all of you in agreement?" His amber eyes bore into Snowtuft's yellow ones.

Most of the cats chorused 'yes' but Snowtuft kept quiet. Mapleshade shot him a dirty glare as she stalked away, but he didn't care. He felt Tearstone walking away as well, but made no attempt to follow her. *I know that I'm right, but no cat would listen!*

After sitting for asome time, Snowtuft realised that he would have to rebel silently. And on his own. Because he would never welcome Ashfur as an ally.

Ever.

28 (THEN)

"Mudstar, I wish to stay back at camp. I feel a little tired tonight." Snowtuft pretended to cough. Shredtail padded to his side and pushed his nose into Snowtuft's shoulder. "I'll stay with Snowtuft, then."

"Alright. I pray to StarClan that this isn't our first outbreak of greencough." The ShadowClan leader was still frail, but had mustered the strength to lead ShadowClan to the Gathering. "We cannot afford to seem weak," he had insisted to a very displeased Silverlight.

As soon as Mudstar and the other cats had left, Shredtail and Snowtuft headed to the dirtplace. Making sure that no cat followed them, the two friends slipped outside. Snowtuft tasted the air for scents, relieved that the sounds of ShadowClan going to the Gathering was distant.

"Come on! We're going to be late!" Fleawhisker wriggled out from under a pile of bracken, shaking out his fur. A moment later, Tearstone crawled out behind him, her amber eyes gleaming with excitement. The four cats trotted along the familiar trail, and Snowtuft recalled the time when he had first bumped onto Batear's group. That time, he had still been a mouse-hearted apprentice, afraid of everything in the world. Now, there was only a tiny fragment of him before.

His path was laid out from the beginning, right up to this moment.

Coldheart... this may seem extreme, but I hope that you will be proud of me in the end. If Batear takes over the Clans, no cat will be like me, who was practically afraid of my own shadow. Was. I will live up to you, I promise! Your name will be honoured for bravery when I become leader of ShadowClan. Gingershadow, the traitor to you, will be slain by me.

And before Snowtuft knew it, they were marching behind Batear, heading for the ThunderClan camp.

The night was eerie, the chill reaching to the hearts of the warriors. They approached ThunderClan's camp, then split into three. "Remember your places," Batear hissed. He would be going straight into the camp, and Snowtuft had been delighted when he was chosen to be with the group's leader.

Fenneldust's team broke away first, and Tearstone gave Snowtuft a nod before padding away with Fleawhisker. "Good luck!" Snowtuft called softly to the gray-and-white she-cat. A pair of light blue eyes shone in the darkness as Rippaw poked his head from the dirtplace tunnel, and Fenneldust's team entered the ThunderClan camp. They would come out from there at Batear's signal- stationed right inside the camp without a single cat knowing.

The last team was the biggest of them all. Whisperear, formerly of ThunderClan, led them. They would circle the outside of the camp and slowly advance inwards after a while, catching any cats who tried to escape. Shredtail whisked his tail as a goodbye to Snowtuft before hurrying after the light gray-brown tom.

Once every cat was in position, Batear raced into the camp. The gorse thorns, meant to slow enemies down, had already been torn down by Moosecloud, who was at the entrance. The black she-cat yowled, "Intruders!" Then pounced on Batear. The two of them scuffled on the ground, though Snowtuft knew that both their claws would be sheathed.

Cats began swarming from the dens, not many but all with courage. They formed a scraggly line, snarling at Batear and his team. But the black-and-white tom, who had untangled himself from Moosecloud, looked bored and commanded, "Attack!"

Snowtuft's breath slowed as his eyes caught another pair of yellow ones. *Gingerstrike.* The arrogant tom who had killed Slatepetal. He flew forward, and the orange tabby tom reared to meet him in midair.

Claws slashed his chest, but Snowtuft hardly noticed the pain. He twisted out of Gingerstrike's grip, sinking his teeth deep into his foreleg. Gingerstrike shrieked and shook Snowtuft off, and he glimpsed the pale white colour of bone showing through the

bitemark with a prick of satisfaction.

But Gingerstrike, despite the pain, hurled himself at Snowtuft, ramming onto his side. Winded, Snowtuft gasped for air while Gingerstrike took the opportunity to slice Snowtuft's ear. Feeling blood run down his forehead, Snowtuft quickly recovered and leaped in the air, twisting to land accurately on the orange tabby tom's back.

Gingerstrike bucked, but Snowtuft clung on like a burr, digging his hind claws into the ThunderClan tom's spine. In a swift move, he used a paw to hook Gingerstrike's legs from underneath him. Unbalanced, Gingerstrike wobbled before crashing down, having already lost the use of the foreleg Snowtuft had bit.

It's time to end this.

Snowtuft raised one paw and slammed it down onto Gingerstrike's neck, curling his lip at the sound of a bone breaking.

29 (THEN)

The second wave struck.

Fenneldust's team exploded from the dirtplace, and Snowtuft found himself fighting beside Tearstone. The two cats worked in rhythm, swiping and ducking as if they had known each other since birth.

Just as they were slowly advancing towards the medicine den, Tearstone staggered, almost crumpling to the ground. "Tearstone!" Snowtuft faltered for a moment, and Whitefire, whom they had been fighting, landed a blow that sent him reeling. Snowtuft snarled and kicked the white tom away from him, into Fenneldust's paws.

He darted to the gray-and-white she-cat's side. "What's wrong?" Tearstone was grimacing in pain, limping towards the medicine den. She glanced at Snowtuft, then rolled over. Snowtuft gasped in horror.

There was a gaping wound in Tearstone's belly, leaking into the ground. Blood pumped continuously from it, and Snowtuft could scarcely believe how much blood a cat contained. "How... when... who did this?" He demanded, crouching down beside the gray-and-white she-cat. The sounds of battle seemed muffled now, his heart's pounding echoed in his ears.

"Whitefire." Tearstone's eyes seemed to roll, the whites showing. "While... we were.. fighting." She was fighting for breath now, each one a difficulty.

"Don't speak. Save your energy." Snowtuft's voice rasped in his throat, and he pressed on the wound, attempting to staunch the bleeding. Tearstone winced, and he gave her ear a lick. "Don't die now... please."

Surprise seemed to keep the gray-and-white she-cat awake for a few more moments. "I thought that you didn't... feel that about me," she murmured, barely audible. Snowtuft hesitated, unsure of what to

say.

Tearstone smirked slightly, and her amber eyes glimmered with a feeling that was practically unknown to Snowtuft. Was it love? Affection? The gray-and-white she-cat gasped for air, then their eyes locked for the final time. "What was I to you, then?"

Snowtuft knew two things. One, that he didn't love Tearstone that way. And two, they were more than friends. Then what was Tearstone to him? But as Tearstone's beautiful amber eyes fluttered shut, Snowtuft knew the answer.

He leaned closer to Tearstone's tufted ears, letting his breath stir her ear fur and ruffle them. "You were my littermate."

When he withdrew, Tearstone was gone. Her chest no longer moved; her eyes cloudy and the scent of death already settling on her. But Snowtuft didn't think he imagined the happiness etched on her delicate face.

"Tearstone!" Snowtuft jerked out of his silent mourning, the sounds of battle raging in his ears once more. A blood-streaked tom hurtled towards them, letting out a wail. It was Fleawhisker.

The gray-and-brown tom flung himself beside his sister's body, burying his nose in her bloodstained fur. "Who did this?" He hissed.

"Whitefire." Now that he was alert, Snowtuft felt rage pulsing through every limb, every fibre of his body. Fleawhisker raised his head, his amber eyes full of anguish and determination. "Are you thinking of doing what I want to do?"

Snowtuft nodded. "But we must move her body first." He didn't want Tearstone's body to be tripped on, stepped on, or anything else. Together, he and Fleawhisker carried her body to the side of the ThunderClan camp, slowly lowering her to the ground. "Goodbye, Tearstone," Fleawhisker breathed.

There was a sudden shriek from the medicine den. Poppystream, the dark ginger medicine cat, stumbled out, blood running down her chest from a wound on her throat. She stumbled forward, then

fell. There were yowls of shock and horror from the ThunderClan cats as they lunged toward her unmoving body.

Then Batear strode out of the medicine cat, Fenneldust and Rippaw beside him. Understanding the signal, Snowtuft and Fleawhisker moved to stand beside them, followed by more of Batear's group.

ThunderClan was in shambles now. Dens destroyed, injured cats everywhere, some of them dead. Like their medicine cat. Batear glanced around the camp triumphantly. "Do you surrender?"

One by one, the ThunderClan cats bowed their heads. But then a defiant yowl rang around the clearing.

"No, we do not."

30 (NOW)

There were sounds of a cat crashing through the undergrowth. *Ashfur?* Snowtuft slid behind a tree, unsheathing his claws.

Then, a dark gray shape began to appear, racing through the trees. Snowtuft tensed his muscles, then shot out from his tree, barrelling into the dark gray tabby tom and slamming him to the ground. Only then did Snowtuft realise that the cat whom he'd attacked wasn't Ashfur, but an unknown one.

The young tom's amber eyes were full of panic as he struggled under Snowtuft's strong paws, his face pushed into the debris of the forest floor. "Who are you?" he choked out, writhing desperately.

"I could ask you the same thing," Snowtuft growled into the unknown tom's ear. "What are you doing here?" Dark Forest cats didn't usually stray to the outskirts.

"I'm looking for a living warrior who was brought here by mistake." *A living warrior? Perhaps this strange tom knows something.* Snowtuft loosened his grip slightly. *He might be an ally...* "A living warrior? So that's what's going on, is it?" He questioned, moving back to allow the dark gray tabby tom to get up.

The tom shook his pelt, turning around to look at Snowtuft. For a moment, confusion showed in his amber eyes, then Snowtuft saw him tense, gazing intently at Snowtuft. The young tabby seemed to be deep in thought, not replying to Snowtuft's question and staying silent.

Snowtuft tried his best to not let exasperation show. Perhaps I should try to be a bit friendly. "Hi. I'm Snowtuft," he introduced. "I'm Shadowsight." Shadowsight paused for a moment, then continued. "Can you tell me what's going on in the Dark Forest?"

I thought that he knew? Snowtuft twitched his whiskers, trying to act composed. "Funny. I was going to ask you the same thing.

Things have been changing recently. I've seen a strange cat here who comes and goes; I thought he might be a StarClan cat, because he has sparkles in his fur. But I have no idea how he got here." He shrugged nonchalantly. *Don't let Shadowsight know too much, in case he's working for Ashfur...*

"Have you noticed anything else?" Shadowsight asked. He seemed genuinely curious, and Snowtuft blinked before deciding to let him know a bit more. "Since that cat appeared, I've noticed that the forest is shrinking. Parts of it l used to know well have faded into mist, and if I walk into the mist, I feel light-headed." *And I almost died.* Snowtuft stopped himself just in time, not wanting to show weakness.

"That's awful. And you think this strange cat is behind it all?" Despite the concerned tone, Shadowsight's amber eyes told Snowtuft that he knew something else. "Yes, I'm sure of it. Some of the other cats here have started to work for him. He promises them great things in the future if his plan succeeds." That was something less important, though true. Mapleshade and Thistleclaw had believed him, and other cats had also joined Ashfur at the sight of the leaders doing so.

"But you didn't join him?" Shadowsight's tone was careful now, as if he was stepping on a ground full of thorns. *Never!* Snowtuft shook his head. "Not for anything. That is one evil cat. And I haven't told you the worst yet. Some of he other cats have just... disappeared. They don't vanish all at once, they sort of... fade. I'm scared that I'm fading, too." Snowtuft shuddered at the thought, then realised that somehow, he had trusted Shadowsight enough to tell him what he feared. *I hope that I don't regret it.*

Shadowsight was quiet for a long time, deep in thought. Then the dark gray tabby tom twitched an ear. "I'm sorry that's happening to you. I'm a living cat, so I don't know much about what happens here." His voice was strong and steady, but his words aroused Snowtuft's interest. "A living cat? Yes, I'm familiar with that. You must be dreaming." No wonder there hadn't been... the aura around Shadowsight.

"I am... Things are very bad in the Clans, and the StarClan cat you

noticed is the reason for that, too." *Talking about the oh-so-wonderful Clans again. I see nothing changed.* Snowtuft nodded, then a new question occurred to him.

"Do you know how many seasons have passed since I died?" Time was different in the Dark Forest. "No, I've never heard your name. Which was your Clan?" Hearing Shadowsight's innocent question, Snowtuft wanted to dig his claws into the ground. *Do I look as fat as RiverClan, or as scrawny as WindClan? Or perhaps as arrogant as ThunderClan?* "I was a ShadowClan cat," he replied, hiding his annoyance.

"Oh, I'm from ShadowClan too. Our only elder just now is Oakfur. Do you know him?" Shadowsight sounded much friendlier, but Snowtuft didn't understand why the young tabby chose to ask about the elder. "Who is Clan leader?" he asked instead.

"Tigerstar. He's my father." Shadowsight puffed out his chest. "Oh, I knew Tigerstar! He's a great cat. He could have been leader of the whole forest if it hadn't been for that stupid kittypet Firestar." *He was so courageous... but wasn't Tigerstar in the Dark Forest? And he was killed by Firestar... wait.* "I thought he was dead. I saw him here..."

"Er... this is a different Tigerstar. The cat you remember died many seasons ago. I wasn't even born then," Shadowsight explained awkwardly. Case in point. Snowtuft let out a heavy sigh. "Time moves strangely in the Dark Forest. I might have been here for a hundred moons, or only one." Snowtuft looked down at his paws, then raised his head to look at Shadowsight. "I don't usually talk to other cats. Since the battle, I can only hear then, or catch a glimpse of them, slinking through the forest. So I don't learn anything about the living world from them. But one thing I do know: Cats who lived in certain parts of the Dark Forest are gone, and sometimes the forest itself is gone, too. The boundaries are closing in. I don't know what is happening, but I'm afraid that I won't exist much longer, too." He felt resigned to his fate, and saw sympathy shine in Shadowsight's amber eyes.

"Do you remember why you came here?" the dark gray tabby tom asked. Snowtuft struggled to recall memories of his life. He knew

the cats from his life... Tearstone, Fleawhisker, Shredtail and Ripclaw... and Moosecloud! And Batear, Fenneldust, Whisperear... but he didn't know where some of them were now. And the events of his life were more vague, as if shrouded in mist. When he tried to remember, all that came through was fear, anguish and rage. *I certainly wasn't a happy cat!*

"I don't remember much about my life. I vaguely remember that I wasn't the nicest cat. Well, if I had been, I wouldn't have ended up here, would I? When I was alive, I know I cared a lot about power. But what does power mean now? Nothing. When you spend forever slinking through a dark and dying forest, you realise how little power you ever had." It was true, and Snowtuft had learnt it the hard way.

"You said you knew the first Tigerstar. That battle you mentioned... was it the Great Battle between the Dark Forest and the living Clans?" Snowtuft inwardly cringed. *I don't want to talk about that!* A sharp bolt of anger drove through his heart. "Yes, I remember that. I fought at Tigerstar's side. But I don't want to talk about it anymore. Just shut up about it, okay?"

Shadowsight looked briefly startled, then responded. "Okay. Suppose you show me around the Dark Forest? I need to get some idea of what this starry cat is doing." *Thank Tigerstar.* Snowtuft exhaled softly. "Oh, I can show you that. Follow me."

Snowtuft led Shadowsight across familiar trails, until they reached a shallow valley where the mist was thickest. "What do you think of that?" he asked his younger companion. Shadowsight's amber eyes widened. "That's... bizarre."

Well, I have something to ask of you. "It's closer now than it was the other day. And this isn't the only place where it's happening. It's like the fog is rolling in from all sides- it's making the Dark Forest smaller. I need help. I know I wasn't the best cat when I was alive. All of us Dark Forest cats have done things we shouldn't have. That's why we're here. But surely I have the right to exist? Something is destroying my home, and I don't understand why." *Extra soppiness for a Clan cat.*

"I don't know-" Shadowsight tried to interject, but Snowtuft ignored him. "You seem like a smart cat. Will you help me?"

At that moment, the fate of the future balanced on the whole interaction.

Frostwing

Kind of like an in-between chapter to help you see what exactly happened during the Gathering and even before that...

They're attacking the ThunderClan camp on the full moon. The Gathering! Snowtuft... my own brother wants to wipe a Clan out. And they want to kill Poppystream so that ThunderClan will be helpless.

Frostwing stumbled into camp, her head reeling. She had been merely going to the dirtplace last night when she had seen Snowtuft going out with Tearstone, Fleawhisker and Shredtail. Out of curiosity, she had decided to follow them.

And that's when everything went downhill. The four cats had met with a huge black-and-white tom whom they addressed as Batear. Batear was like the leader; he was commanding and powerful. And humorous, but in a cruel way. Frostwing had heard with her own ears the way he'd scorned ThunderClan, but her heart broke at the sight of Snowtuft laughing with the rest of the rogues. He and Frostwing might not be the best siblings, but they were connected by blood, no matter how many times they tried to deny it.

And Gingershadow... oh, Gingershadow! Their mother was in the nursery right now, heavy with Ashtail's unborn kits. Frostwing and Snowtuft had been her pride and joy; what would the ginger she-cat say?

"Watch where you're going!" A sharp exclaimation jolted Frostwing out of her blind stumbling. She blinked a couple of times, then her vision cleared and she saw the Clan deputy, Cherrycloud, glaring at her. But Cherrycloud's sky-blue eyes softened when she too in Frostwing's shaken face. "Frostwing? What's wrong?"

Frostwing didn't want to betray Snowtuft, but the shock was too much for her to bear alone. Words came tumbling out of her. "Snowtuft and his friends... attacking ThunderClan at the full

moon..." To Frostwing's utter horror, she began telling Cherrycloud everything she had learnt.

By the time Frostwing had halted, panting, the sun was beginning to rise. She glanced at Cherrycloud and saw that the cream-and-ginger she-cat looked furious. Furious was actually an understatement. "Those traitors. I'll claw their throats out for you, Frostwing," she growled through gritted teeth.

"No!" Despite the situation, Frostwing didn't want that to happen to Snowtuft. "Please don't, Cherrycloud. Just talk to them, please. And don't tell anyone."

Cherrycloud's whiskers twitched. "You want me to help hide a traitor?" Her tone was disbelieving. "Not like that. We can try to change Snowtuft's mind... it's not too late!"

Cherrycloud heaved a deep sigh. "Very well. But if we don't succeed, I will have to tell Mudstar." "But Mudstar's in one of his whitecough relapses!" Frostwing was anxious for the old leader. Cherrycloud retorted, "His physical ability is affected, not his mental health."

At that moment, Snowtuft appeared with Fleawhisker. "They're going to catch Rippaw now," Frostwing whispered softly. But Cherrycloud was already calling out to Snowtuft.

Just before the white tom turned around, Frostwing darted away. She didn't want Snowtuft to know that she was the one that had turned him in.

On patrol with her mate, Cindersmoke, Frostwing was absentminded. "Seriously?" Goldpelt demanded when Frostwing missed a mouse that had practically scurried into her paws. Cindersmoke looked concerned. "Do you feel alright, Frostwing? I can take you to Silverlight," the pale gray tabby tom touched his nose to her ear gently.

"It's alright, Cindersmoke. I think I'll just go back to camp and rest awhile. I had a bellyache in the night." Frostwing pressed her cheek against her mate's. Cindersmoke nodded, his orange eyes full of

worry for her. "Stay safe!"

Looking back, Frostwing felt that Cindersmoke should've said that to Cherrycloud.

Frostwing was almost back to camp where she smelt the metallic tang of blood. Her pelt bristled, and she traced the scent until she reached a small grassy clearing at the back of camp.

And there was Snowtuft, standing over Cherrycloud's dead body.

Frostwing wanted to shriek in terror, but no sound came. She could only watch as Snowtuft gripped the dead deputy's corpse in his teeth and dragged her into the undergrowth, into an abandoned fox den. Then the skinny white tom began washing his bloody paws almost nonchalantly.

First Leopardleap... now Cherrycloud? She was your Clanmate!

Frostwing retched, her head spinning. *Snowtuft, I really believed that you could...you would...*

At the Gathering

Frostwing barely heard the leaders' words. Cindersmoke was pressed tightly against her. She had told her mate everything, and the pale gray tabby tom had been her pillar of support. Snowtuft had told Mudstar that he felt unwell, but Frostwing knew what was about to come.

I'm sorry Snowtuft, but I can't let evil win over good. Frostwing shook off Cindersmoke's tail, suddenly sure of what she was about to do.

"I'm sorry, leaders. But I have something urgent I need to tell all of you. Especially Amberstar." Eyes swivelled to look at Frostwing. Amberstar's amber eyes were sharp. "Well?"

Frostwing took a deep breath. "ThunderClan's camp is being attacked right now."

31 (THEN)

New determination seemed to light the eyes of the ThunderClan cats. Fighting broke out once more. Snowtuft and Fleawhisker threw themselves at Whitefire, but the white tom snapped at Fleawhisker's ear and landed a heavy blow on Snowtuft.

Amberstar, Mudstar, Hawkstar and Oakstar charged down, with their warriors right on their tail. They fell on Batear's fighing force, clawing and spitting. But Snowtuft was undeterred. He and Fleawhisker were focused on Whitefire, driving the white tom backwards blow by blow.

Just as Whitefire's legs crumpled beneath him, a white blur shot out and knocked Snowtuft to the ground. "I will not let you kill another cat!" Frostwing screeched, sinking her claws into Snowtuft's neck.

Snowtuft kicked viciously at his sister, though he could not throw her off. "Are you still agonising over poor Leopardleap's death?" He sneered at the white she-cat. "Not only hers! Have you forgotten Cherrycloud?"

Snowtuft's heart skipped a beat. *Cherrycloud? How does Frostwing know about that?* "Cherrycloud has been missing for a long time! We've got Ashtail as a deputy now." His adopted father had been appointed, much to Snowtuft's dismay.

"Liar! We all know that you killed Cherrycloud." Frostwing spat in his face. Snowtuft finally managed to struggle free. "I did not! It was a fox!"

"Ah, but how did you know about that? Isn't Cherrycloud supposed to be missing?" A mocking sneer rang in Snowtuft's ears as a new cat knocked him down. Snowtuft kicked out strongly and turned to face Cinderflame, swiping his claws across the pale gray tabby tom's face. "It was a guess, okay?"

"Still in denial, dear brother?" Frostwing padded over to stand

beside Cinderflame, arching her back. "I saw you kill her! Every cat knows that you murdered two cats already." Leopardleap. Cherrycloud. Gingerstrike.

"Sorry, but you're wrong. I murdered more than two." Before the horror could register in Frostwing's eyes, Snowtuft leaped, biting down hard on the white she-cat's shoulder. He leaped into the air, flinging out a paw and tripping Cindersmoke, then slashed a paw across his unguarded belly.

"No!" Frostwing sprang forward, sinking her teeth into Snowtuft's hind leg and dragging him backward. Cindersmoke staggered to his paws, then slammed his front paws onto Snowtuft's spine, tearing mercilessly.

Snowtuft thrashed in the two cats' grip. *Why is no cat coming to my aid?* Then he realised the horrible truth; Batear's group was outnumbered almost two to one.

Desperation gave Snowtuft new strength, and he flipped over, pinning Cindersmoke underneath him and slicing open the warrior's muzzle. He rolled over just in time, avoiding Frostwing's blow and sending one of his own that sent the white she-cat staggering.

However, Frostwing and Cindersmoke had the advantage of numbers, and the advantage of familiarity. Within moments, Snowtuft's face was pressed against the earth again, while his struggles grew weaker with the sense of defeat.

At that moment, a pained yowl echoed around the camp. "Retreat!" At the sound of that, Frostwing and Cindersmoke released Snowtuft. Snowtuft got to his paws, staring in disbelief as his friends and allies tore away from their attackers and hared after Batear, Fenneldust and Whisperear.

"So, are you going?" Cindersmoke snarled. Snowtuft simply hissed at the pale gray tabby tom before turning tail and fleeing the camp, his ears burning with humiliation.

But in the forest, Batear's paw steps suddenly became quieter and he swung around to face the group, his green eyes glinting with

malice. Snowtuft understood what it meant, and a light sparked in every cats' eyes. A new light.

Because the battle wasn't over yet.

32 (NOW)

"Will you help me, Snowtuft? I want to distract Ashfur so that Squirrelflight can get away." Shadowsight looked imploringly at Snowtuft.

No way! I'd rather fade from the Dark Forest... actually, I don't want that either. "Absolutely not! I've seen the island where Ashfur keeps spirit cats. He controls them with his mind. I don't know how he manages it, but I'm not risking ending up like that, thank you very much." Snowtuft shuddered at the memory his words had called upon- the gloomy patch of land surrounded by the dark water, full of cats with blank stares and robotic tones.

"Island? What island?" Shadowsight's ears pricked. *Oops. I guess he didn't know that before.* Snowtuft shook his head. "You really don't want to know." He felt protective of the young tom, as if he was Shadowsight's mentor.

Shadowsight looked frustrated but didn't argue, creeping forward to the edge of their hiding spot to listen to Ashfur and the dark ginger she-cat whom he had called Squirrelflight. Based on their tense expressions, bared teeth and unsheathed claws, Snowtuft guessed that the two cats were arguing.

Suddenly, Shadowsight turned to leave, but then glanced at Snowtuft, a question in his amber eyes. Snowtuft nodded, falling into step beside the younger tabby. *I'm not leaving you to face this alone, no matter how stupidly reckless you are.* Toether, they followed at a safe distance behind Ashfur and Squirrelflight.

As they moved onwards, Snowtuft knew where they were heading; it was to the island. And he was proved right when soon, he and Shadowsight were gazing down at a dark lake with an island in the middle.

"Is that the island you told me about?" Shadowsight inquired. *Did you see any other islands?* Snowtuft gave a tense nod. "That's it." It

looked worse than last time, more cats were on the island, and the island seemed to have shrunk, the dark water enclosing the stretch of land.

Ashfur was speaking to Squirrelflight, and a gleam of triumph shone in his dark blue eyes. "See, here's a familiar face..." he was saying. A dark brown tabby tom stepped out from the crowd, and Snowtuft blinked, his neck fur prickling. Then he loosened his shoulders. For a moment Snowtuft had thought that it was Tigerstar- the dark brown tabby tom looked exactly like the great leader of the Dark Forest. Shadowsight gasped from beside Snowtuft, his amber eyes wide.

Ashfur half closed his eyes, his expression fixed in concentration. *He's controlling someone.* Snowtuft felt sick at the thought. The dark brown tabby tom's head jerked and his ears pricked up as if he had heard a call. He padded all the way to the edge of the island, where the only 'bridge' lay.

"Let him pass, Darkstripe," Ashfur called, his slithery voice making Snowtuft shiver.

The dark brown tabby tom halted in front of Squirrelflight and Ashfur. "See how weak your former mate is now," Ashfur gloated, wafting his tail toward the tom. *They were mates? So the dark brown tabby tom must be...* Snowtuft fished for the name of Tigerstar's other son. *Bramblestar!*

While he was thinking, he had missed Squirrelflight's response, but at the sound of her voice, Bramblestar's amber eyes blinked and cleared. "Squirrel-" the ThunderClan leader cried out, but Ashfur let out a snarl and the blank film covered his eyes again. Snowtuft saw Shadowsight extend his claws, fury burning in his amber eyes.

"I'll show you... I'll show you how foolish it is to stand against me." Ashfur's voice was soft but menacing, the kind that Snowtuft hated the most.

Without warning, Bramblestar swiped at Swuirrelflight. The dark ginger she-cat reared back, letting out a cry of alarm. Bramblestar began to circle her, claws extended and teeth bared. *What is Ashfur*

doing? Snowtuft could barely hide his own horror.

Shadowsight glanced at Snowtuft, his amber eyes reflecting Snowtuft's own dismay. "That vile cat is making Squirrelflight's own mate attack her! We have to do something." *Not again!* Snowtuft shook his head. "There's nothing we can do."

Squirrelflight screeched at Ashfur, but Bramblestar leaped at Squirrelflight. The dark ginger she-cat dodged the attack, evidently trying not to harm her mate but not wanting to be caught.

"Bramblestar! Remember who you are! Fight against Ashfur... please!" Squirrelflight begged as the dark brown tabby tom snapped at his throat. To Snowtuft's surprise, Bramblestar pulled away from her. "I'm sorry, Squirrel-"

He was cut off again by Ashfur, who seemed to reinforce his control. After a brief tussling, Squirrelflight managed to pin her mate down, but didn't seem to know what to do next. Ashfur was- obviously- furious, tearing at the ground with his claws and yowling at Squirrelflight.

Shadowsight turned towards Snowtuft again, who let out an inward groan. *There's no need for Shadowsight to even open his mouth for me to know what he wants.* "Maybe if we attack Ashfur, we'll break his concentration- and then Bramblestar might be able to snap out of his control. I know that it's a scary idea, but it's all I can think off..." The dark gray tabby tom stared at Snowtuft pleadingly, but he backed away.

You're acting and thinking as if I care about Bramblestar! I really don't want this, Shadowsight. "Have you got bees in your brain? This isn't my fight, and I'm certainly not going to die for it." He took a step into the bracken, then wondered if he had been too harsh and halted, looking over his shoulder. "Good luck to you," he told Shadowsight gruffly, then padded deeper into the forest.

He walked alone in the trees, feeling guilt prick his heart. It wasn't fair to leave the young tom to fight Ashfur alone. *But what else can I do? Die again for a cause that I don't even want to take part in?*

Exhaustion suddenly weighed heavily on his shoulders, and Snowtuft sat on the root of a nearby tree, gazing out into the dark lake and the tiny island.

Oh, Shadowsight. I really hope you don't die... because there'll be nothing for you.

33 (THEN)

The group of cats were gazing at the ShadowClan camp when Snowtuft saw Silverlight come out of the nursery, looking exhausted. "Gingershadow has four kits," the silver-and-white she-cat proclaimed. Immediately, a familiar dark gray tabby pelt shifted by a clump of ferns. Ashtail!

So that was why Silverlight and Ashtail weren't at the battle. Gingershadow had kitted! "Wait. We can't attack yet!" Snowtuft didn't know why, but he turned to face Batear. "Why? I thought you wanted this." Confusion was etched on the black-and-white tom's face.

Snowtuft took a deep breath. "Gingershadow- the she-cat who just kitted- is my mother. Can you just retreat to the camp, maybe rest a while first, please? I once made a promise to the father of the kits... I feel like I should fulfil that, at least." *Promise me that you'll treat Gingershadow's kits- my kits- as your own siblings.* Ashtail's voice rang in Snowtuft's head, drowning out the screeches of the voice he used to always obey.

But Batear didn't move. "Why? I had the impression that you didn't care about your mother anymore.. but perhaps I was wrong. Give me one good reason why I should let you stay, and not attack." "Yeah. Besides, ShadowClan will be back from ThunderClan's camp soon," Shredtail added. Snowtuft shot his best friend a furious glance. *You were supposed to back me up!*

But he took a deep breath. "I think Mudstar might feel like it is best for ShadowClan to stay in ThunderClan camp for a while, especially for himself. Besides, Honeyshine is with them. And also... ShadowClan is my birth Clan, after all." The yellow-and-white she-cat had trained as a medicine cat before she had decided to step down and become mates with Cedartail.

Batear shrugged. "It was you who wanted this, Snowtuft, not us. If you want to cancel this battle, go ahead. But when you change your

mind, come to the clearing before sunhigh tomorrow. I hope you come back to your senses by then." With a swish of his patchy tail, the black-and-white tom gathered the group and left.

Shredtail and Fleawhisker turned to leave as well, and Snowtuft felt the ground sway. "Aren't you two staying back with me?" He called forlornly. Shredtail half turned, the look in his yellow eyes indecisive, but Fleawhisker snapped, "You aren't willing to avenge my sister, so why should we stay? Come on, Shredtail."

And the two toms walked away. Snowtuft felt the loss heavy on his shoulders. *I'm really on my own now...*

Taking a deep breath, he padded into camp.

Instantly, all eyes fixed on him. Blackheart stopped in his tracks, letting out a brief hiss. Patchleaf and Flamestripe got to their paws from the fresh-kill pile and stood beside Blackheart, arching their backs. Hazelfang and Nightwisp bared their teeth at him.

So few cats, and yet with so much bravery. Snowtuft took a step back. "Wait! I've come back to ShadowClan... for good." The words sounded strange on his tongue. *Am I really abandoning Batear for ShadowClan?*

However, none of the cats looked convinced. But then a new voice called out. "Let him stay, at least to look at Gingershadow's kits. When Mudstar comes back, he can decide whether he wants to let Snowtuft stay and redeem himself, or exile him." It was Ashtail.

The dark gray tabby tom was standing at the entrance of the nursery, his sky-blue eyes guarded. Snowtuft wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or irritated. "Well? Come see Gingershadow. She wants to see you, despite you being a traitor." Ashtail regarded Snowtuft coldly as he padded slowly to the nursery, not meeting the eyes of any cat.

The Clan deputy followed Snowtuft into the nursery, where Gingershadow was curled around four tiny kits. Upon seeing them, Snowtuft's heart softened slightly and he dared to look at Ashtail. "I remembered my promise," he murmured.

The tabby shifted his paws. "There's no point in doing that when all you've done is betray the Clan," he growled. Snowtuft didn't have anything else to say to that, so shifted his gaze to the kits. "Did you name them yet?" Snowtuft asked Gingershadow.

"Ashtail and I already had names planned. The yellow tabby she-kit is Cherrykit, and the big dusky brown tom is Branchkit. And... the smaller dark gray tabby tom is Slatekit, together with the white-and-tabby she-kit being Petalkit." Snowtuft felt Gingershadow's gaze rest on him.

After a long moment, he spoke. "Slatekit and Petalkit." *Slatepetal.* A warm feeling enveloped his heart as his gaze rested on the white-and-tabby she-kit, already feeling as if she was his favourite. Petalkit let out a mewl as Slatekit nudged her, but latched on again and continued suckling.

Then his gaze was transferred to Cherrykit. Did Gingershadow know about his murder of Cherrycloud? Probably not. But it was a struggle to not bush up his fur at the sight of the yellow tabby she-kit, evidently named after the former deputy.

"Are you alright?" Gingershadow sounded concerned, and Snowtuft realised that his ears were flattened. But before he could reply, he heard a commotion outside. Was Mudstar back already?

Indeed he was. Snowtuft didn't even have time to say good-bye before Ashtail brought him out to stand in front of the black-and-brown tom. Mudstar stared down at Snowtuft, distrust sparking in his yellow eyes.

"Well, Snowtuft. What do you think ShadowClan should do to you now?"

34 (NOW)

Of course Snowtuft didn't know how long had passed when yet another living cat came.

But it wasn't Shadowsight. The newcomer was a bright yellow tom, and his fearful sky-blue eyes were fixated on the island; or rather, what was happening there. Snowtuft knew that there had been a disturbance, but didn't want to look. But finally, he stretched and glanced at the yellow tom staring out at the island from the tree he was perched on. *I suppose I'll talk to that living cat. Suppose he was sent by Shadowsight to find me?*

As Snowtuft approached, the yellow tom tensed and spun around, sliding out his claws. "Don't come any closer," he warned, letting out a growl from within the depths of his throat. Alright, definitely not sent by Shadowsight. "Keep your fur on. I'm a friend." Snowtuft grunted as he clambered up the oak to sit on a lower branch.

"I don't have any friends in the Dark Forest," the living cat snarled, though his sky-blue eyes belied a slight curiosity. "You don't? Then you're not the cat I think you are. I can see you're a living cat. Don't you have something to do with that scrawny little gray tabby a while ago?" Snowtuft didn't know if it was really a while ago or a long time, but it felt like a short time.

"Shadowsight? You've seen Shadowsight?" The yellow tom exclaimed, forgetting to be wary of Snowtuft. *Aha.* Snowtuft nodded. "Yeah. He was fighting Ashfur and then he just... disappeared. I guess he went back to the living world." It was just a guess, but Snowtuft hoped that what he had just said was true.

The unknown tom pondered about Snowtuft's words, but his shoulders relaxed a little. "So who are you, and what do you want with me?" he asked. "My name's Snowtuft. I helped Shadowsight, and I'll help you, if you like." *More like abandoned Shadowsight,* he reflected ruefully.

The yellow tom's sky-blue gaze narrowed, as if he still didn't want to trust Snowtuft. "Why would you want to help me?" He asked. Snowtuft gritted his teeth, but replied, "I don't like the way the forest is shrinking."

"Shrinking? Is that what's happening?" *Seriously? How can you not know?* "Oh, yes." Snowtuft nodded. "There are plenty of places I remember that just... don't exist anymore. A few cats too." *Like the muddy terrain where I used to train Whiskernose. And I haven't seen Batear for so long, not since...* "Anyway- most of all, I especially don't like the creeping mist. I reckon it's something to do with Ashfur, so if I can do anything to help you living cats get rid of him, I will."

The guarded look in the yellow tom's eyes melted at last. "Okay. I'm called Rootspring. I'll be glad of your help if you really mean it. But put a paw wrong, and I'll rip your pelt off." At those words, Snowtuft let out a grunt, feeling amused for the first time in seasons.*Many have tried, don't worry.* He scrambled up the tree to crouch beside Rootspring, taking in the gloomy view below. "I saw what happened on the island. What are you going to do now?"

Rootspring looked calmer now, though his muscles were still braced as if waiting for an attack. After a while, the fluffy tom murmured to Snowtuft, "I have to work out a way of breaking Ashfur's hold over the spirit cats. Then maybe we have a chance of defeating Ashfur once and for all."

Snowtuft knew that he should be encouraging, but for all his efforts, he knew that he looked skeptical. "But how?" he questioned.

Rootspring was quiet for a long time. "Suppose we get down and take a closer look, then," he suggested, rising to his paws. Having no other plan, Snowtuft clambered down the tree together with the yellow tom.

"Do you know how to get past Darkstripe?" Rootspring angled his ears toward the dark tabby tom. "What?" Snowtuft gaped at the yellow tom. "We've got to get to the island, don't we?" Rootspring's tail twitched.

"Yeah, but Darkstripe only follows Ashfur's orders. Every cat does. I

wouldn't be able to get past him, much less bring you along." "But you could pretend that you're escorting me to Ashfur." Rootspring's tail thrashed, rattling the leaves.

"But Darkstripe would bring Ashfur to us. Then what would we do?" Snowtuft pointed out. For once, Rootspring had no reply to that.

Snowtuft let his gaze travel across the water to the thin strip of mud. *Now what?*

35 (THEN)

Snowtuft stared at the ground. *What should I say?* "Mudstar, I am sorry for what I did at the ThunderClan camp. It was mouse-brained to follow my friends."

Mudstar's yellow eyes glinted with an unknown feeling. "So you were following your friends all along, eh?" "Yes." Snowtuft's heart wrenched with guilt. His lie would just make Mudstar believe even further that Shredtail, Tearstone and Fleawhisker were traitors from the start.

So why was the ShadowClan leader looking at Frostwing? The white she-cat was stubbornly refusing to look up from her paws, her ears twitching. After a long while, Mudstar looked back at Snowtuft.

"Even if that is so, you broke the warrior code. You are guilty of killing Leopardleap and Gingerstrike of ThunderClan. And based on an informant, you have also killed Cherrycloud, our deputy!" His yellow eyes were burning with anger. Snowtuft was taken back by the amount of knowledge. *Who told them... who is this 'informant'?*

"I... I didn't kill Cherrycloud!" Snowtuft stammered, though his voice was feeble. Mudstar's eyes narrowed. "In denial. Well, I cannot allow a murderer to live in our midst, so-" "Wait!" The most unexpected cat's voice spoke up.

Frostwing? Snowtuft blinked a couple times to make sure that it wasn't a dream. The white she-cat, her fur ruffled, wade through the crowd of cats. "Snowtuft may have killed Cherrycloud, but he is my brother. Mudstar, please let him stay. He can be imprisoned in ShadowClan until we know that we can trust him."

The spark of hope in Snowtuft's chest flickered out as he stared incredulously at Frostwing. *Imprisoned in camp? I'd rather be exiled!* He stared at Mudstar, hoping with all his heart that the ShadowClan leader would just hurry up and exile him.

To his utter dismay, Mudstar looked grimly amused. "Frostwing, I see your train of thought. If we release Snowtuft, he would just go back to Batear, wouldn't he? And killing him would be cold-hearted." *Cold-hearted.* Snowtuft gritted his teeth, seething at Mudstar's choice of words.

"Very well. Snowtuft will be held captive at the fern enclosure." There were groans from Brightpaw, Coldpaw and Barkpaw- the fern enclosure was a spot often used by the apprentices to play. "Ashtail and Frostwing, the two of you can guard him. Silverlight, tend to Frostwing's wounds first." Mudstar flicked his tail, and Ashtail padded over to Snowtuft.

"Come on, then. To the fern enclosure." Ashtail's sky-blue eyes held no warmth in them. Snowtuft stared beseechingly at the dark gray tabby tom. "But Ashtail..." "No buts. Now hurry up!" The Clan deputy snapped, cuffing Snowtuft over his injured ear.

Inside the enclosure, Snowtuft rubbed the ear, wincing slightly. *And he had to cuff me at that spot!* He thought sullenly, glaring at the dark tabby shadow just outside the entrance. *You can just kill him and escape...* There it was, the familiar voice that had haunted him for so many moons.

No! Snowtuft dug his claws deep into the earth. He had chosen to come back, and he didn't want to regret it. A lithe white shape came over, touched noses with Ashtail. They exchanged words, then Frostwing ducked inside.

Upon seeing his former sister, Snowtuft backed away and let out a hiss. "Are you afraid of me now?" There was a glint in Frostwing's leaf-green eyes.

"No!" Snowtuft lashed his tail twice, sliding out his claws. The white she-cat let out a long sigh. "Brother-" "Don't call me that!" Snowtuft leaped forward, but Frostwing managed to duck. "Snowtuft. I literally saved you from Mudstar, and you act like I'm going to kill you?"

"Saved?" Snowtuft let out a snort. "You know that I hate being confined!" "It was for the good of the Clans," Frostwing retorted.

Snowtuft opened his mouth to argue, but the white she-cat sat down, delicately licking a paw. "Look, I didn't come here to argue with you."

"Yeah, you came here to make my life absolutely miserable," Snowtuft muttered, but he too sat down a fox-length away from the white she-cat. Frostwing didn't protest. "You probably suspect this by now, but I was the informant."

"I knew it!" Snowtuft sprang up once more, his neck fur bushed to twice its original size. *My own sister- former sister- betrayed me.* He let out a growl, preparing to spring.

"Calm down! I had to stop you from destroying ThunderClan." Frostwing remained infuriatingly sure of herself. But at this point, Snowtuft was no longer listening to the nonsense the white she-cat spewed. "I don't care," he spat. "Get out! We will never be siblings again, no matter what you- or any other cat- says."

So much for a nice sibling chat.

36 (NOW)

"I've seen you before. In the battle against the Dark Forest."

The snarl, those accusing amber eyes made Snowtuft shrink away from the powerful ThunderClan leader. *I want to defend myself, but there's no denying what I did...*

Thankfully, Rootspring sprang to his defense. "But now Snowtuft is helping. We were going to lure Ashfur off the island, so that we could try breaking his hold over the other spirits. I know it's not much of a plan..." "It's enough to know that some cat hasn't given up," Bramblestar reassured the yellow tom, who looked pleased by his praise.

Snowtuft zoned out as the two cats began talking. *What am I doing here with these living cats? They aren't even including me...* He twitched the tip of his tail, letting out a soft sigh. It wasn't his fault that Rootspring treated Bramblestar differently from him, given the fact that they were both living cats trapped in the Dark Forest.

As if sensing his loneliness, Bramblestar and Rootspring's attention was suddenly on Snowtuft. "You want to join us, don't you?" Bramblestar questioned, an edge in his tone. "Yes, if I can." Snowtuft had already lost count of the number of times he had repeated that phrase.

"Good. Because for our plan to work, we need your help." The dark brown tabby tom was obviously satisfied with Snowtuft's answer. "Me?" Snowtuft was taken aback. "Yes. We need you to distract Ashfur- say that you found Bramblestar." Rootspring took over, his sky-blue eyes blazing with resolve.

Snowtuft twitched his whiskers thoughtfully. *That seems easy enough, but would that be enough to convince Ashfur? He knows that I've never been a fan of him...* "I will need more of a reason than that. Ashfur's smart- he knows that I would never run to report to him... I'm not really part of his 'team'."

Bramblestar hesitated, shooting a glance over his shoulder. "Well, Ashfur is in charge of the Dark Forest in a way, right?" The ThunderClan leader checked. Snowtuft nodded. "You can tell him that you want your area to be safe," Rootspring suggested.

Snowtuft frowned. "We don't really have territory in the Dark Forest." "But it's our best bet. So do you think it will work?" Bramblestar asked.

"It has as good a chance as any," Rootspring replied. *Easy for you. You're just charging into battle while I have to try and not get my pelt ripped off my Ashfur and his companions.* Snowtuft's mouth twisted wryly as he glanced from Bramblestar to Rootspring and back again. "It's a good plan, but I have to admit I'm having second thoughts about going along with it," he commented at last.

Bramblestar flicked his tail irritably, but Rootspring tipped his head to one side curiously. "Why are you really helping us?" There was no reproach in his question, even though Snowtuft didn't like his loyalties questioned.

But why did he really decide to join them? "When the Dark Forest started shrinking, I just felt resigned. I thought that maybe everything was going to disappear forever, and that I and the other cats who ended up here would just disappear along with it," he began slowly.

Snowtuft saw Rootspring shiver. "Weren't you afraid?" *Who are you, Shredtail?* The thought of his best friend made Snowtuft's heart throb with grief. "You'd think so. But no, I wasn't... not really. I've always believed I deserved to be here, because... Well, why else would I be here? I must have done some bad things when I was alive. Things that earned me my place here. I've always felt that my story was going to end badly."

A tail touched his shoulder gently. "It doesn't have to," Rootspring tried to comfort Snowtuft, and he shrugged it off. "Maybe. Anyway, right when the forest starts to shrink, here come some good cats: Shadowsight and you, Rootspring, and now Bramblestar. Good cats in need of help. Maybe that's a sign that my last actions before I fade away ought to be good ones."

Snowtuft wasn't sure what had made him say the last sentence. But there was a feeling in his gut that told him that this would be his very last 'adventure'. Still, Snowtuft felt embarrassed at the glow of sympathy in both cats' eyes, and the way Bramblestar dipped his head to Snowtuft.

He cleared his throat, giving his pelt a shake. Emotional moment over. "Okay. Are you sure this idea of yours will work? I'm not exactly thrilled that I'll be the bait of your trap, but I'm willing to give it a try." He felt as if he had awoken from a deep slumber, new energy fizzing in his blood.

Bramblestar rose to his paws, resolution clear in his amber eyes. "It's going to work. It's all or nothing now." Rootspring met Snowtuft's eyes, and the support gave Snowtuft the encouragement he needed.

Snowtuft took a deep breath. This is it.

Breaking out of cover, he let out a loud yowl. "Hey, Ashfur!"

Ashfur turned cold dark blue eyes on Snowtuft. Malice glittered in its depths. "What do you want?" he demanded. "There's something you should know."

I'm officially part of the living cats' team now...

37 (NOW)

"Where is Bramblestar?" Ashfur swung his head and stared at Snowtuft. Snowtuft cursed silently under his breath. *That vile tom just had to look at me when I was slipping away!*

"Uh...." Snowtuft stammered, desperately trying to find an excuse. "Perhaps he escaped?" He suggested lamely. Ashfur's dark blue eyes narrowed as he moved closer until he was nose-to-nose with Snowtuft. "So... let me get this straight. You saw Bramblestar here, so came to report to me saying that he looked injured." "He was!" Snowtuft protested, edging backwards ever so slightly.

"Really?" Ashfur smirked. "Then you're either lying, or extremely badly mistaken. Because if Bramblestar was injured, where is the blood?"

Fox dung.

When Snowtuft didn't reply, Ashfur's mouth twisted in a savage snarl. "I knew it! You're working with the living cats, aren't you?" "No!" Snowtuft couldn't believe how badly the plan was falling apart. *All because of my mouse-brained slip...*

Ashfur advanced again, and Snowtuft saw the flecked gray tom's claws slide out. Just as Snowtuft braced himself for the blow that would send him to eternal darkness, Ashfur seemed to freeze. "I see it now! You were merely a distraction..."

Without another word, the pale gray tom pelted back in the direction of the island. Snowtuft stared at his retreating back, thoroughly confused. *What distraction? Why didn't Ashfur try to kill me?*

Realisation hit him, stronger than any blow Ashfur could have dealt.

Somehow the evil tomcat had found out about the real plan, and

was going back to the island to deal with Bramblestar and Rootspring. I have to help them! Snowtuft scrambled to his paws and glanced from side to side.

Slowly, the trees began to look familiar. *There should be a shortcut here... yes!* Snowtuft dashed through the foliage. Ashfur may be the current leader of the Dark Forest, but I'm the one with experience.

As he neared the island, the sounds of battle were almost deafening. *Oh no... hopefully Ashfur hasn't arrived yet!*

The first thing Snowtuft saw was Bramblestar and Squirrelflight slipping away from the island together. *But where's Rootspring? He can't be....*

Snowtuft's heart sank when he realised why Bramblestar and Squirrelflight were almost unnoticed by the Dark Forest cats. In the midst of the fighting, Rootspring was underneath Ashfur, struggling to get free while the flecked tom glared down at him, dark blue eyes blazing with hate.

No, Ashfur! You will not take another cat into the abyss. Snowtuft leaped forward, knocking Ashfur off Rootspring and wrestling him to the ground. Ashfur let out a growl, lashing out furiously.

Sinking his claws into the pale gray tom's shoulders, Snowtuft raised his head to meet Rootspring's stricken gaze. "What are you waiting for? Run, mouse-brain!" he yowled at the yellow tom.

But the Dark Forest warriors were almost on them. *We have no time to waste if we want to survive.* Snowtuft leaped away from Ashfur, shoving Rootspring hard in the hindquarters. "I said, run!" *Do the living cats nowadays not know the meaning of fleeing?*

Side by side, they pelted away from the island. Behind them, Snowtuft heard Ashfur's enraged screech. "Get them! Don't let them get away!"

We've got to hurry! Seeing the panic and confusion on his companion's face, Snowtuft began gasping out directions to Rootspring. *I think I know where Bramblestar and Squirrelflight are...*

Sure enough, it wasn't long before they stumbled onto the two mates. "Bramblestar!" Rootspring yowled.

The ThunderClan cats halted abruptly, waiting for Rootspring and Snowtuft to catch up. "Rootspring! Are you okay? I think you must be the bravest cat I've ever set eyes on," Bramblestar commended the yellow warrior.

Rootspring shrugged. "I'm fine." "We're fine, too. We-" Sensing that Squirrelflight was about to start a whole story, Snowtuft cut in irritably. "Do we have to stand here gossiping? We still have half the Dark Forest on our paws, or have you forgotten about that little problem?"

As the sounds of pursuit grew louder, Snowtuft's muscles tensed. "Okay. Which way?" Rootspring asked, urgency in his tone. "Follow me. I can show you how to get out of here." *I hope. As long as the Moonpool tree isn't blocked...* "Thank StarClan!" Bramblestar exclaimed as he and Squirrelflight began to follow Snowtuft.

They reached the Moonpool tree quickly, and Bramblestar climbed inside first, followed by Squirrelflight. The dark brown tabby tom glanced down at Snowtuft. "Thank you once again," he told Snowtuft, while Squirrelflight dipped her head.

"No problem. Rootspring-" Snowtuft stopped short.

Where was Rootspring?

38 (THEN)

The sun rose steadily over the treetops, nearing sunhigh. Snowtuft worked his claws on the ground, tearing off clumps of grass and soil. *Should I sneak out and meet with Batear or not?*

He glanced toward the dirtplace. *I could ask to go to the dirtplace, then sneak out... but should I?* Snowtuft didn't know what mattered more- family or friends. Batear and the others understood him. They had been in the same position as him.

And yet ShadowClan had raised him. Despite being a mouse-heart at a young age, they had gradually made him a warrior. Snowtuft glanced at Ashtail and Frostwing again, never more indecisive in his entire life.

Then, a new figure appeared at his prison entrance and spoke gently with Ashtail and Frostwing. Snowtuft tensed when he recognised Gingershadow. *What does my mother want with me?*

The dark ginger she-cat's tail-tip twitched upon seeing how wary Snowtuft was. "Calm down, Snowtuft. The kits' eyes just opened, and I wanted to let them see you." "What?" Snowtuft didn't believe what he was hearing. "Doesn't Mudstar think that I'm a danger to the kits?"

Gingershadow's eyes narrowed. "Are you?" She questioned sharply, licking one pale ginger paw and drawing it over her ear. Snowtuft hesitated, his mind instantly flashing back to the pale yellow tabby pelt of Cherrykit. "No..."

Gingershadow relaxed, evidently not noticing the hesitation. "I thought not. Come on, Snowtuft. You do need to stretch your legs, don't you?" She began padding to the entrance. Snowtuft glanced at the sky once more, then arched his back in a long stretch and followed the dark ginger she-cat.

Upon seeing him, Ashtail's neck fur bushed up. "So you're really

letting him go near our kits?" Snowtuft heard the dark gray tabby tom whisper to Gingershadow. Gingershadow pressed her chin against his neck. "It will be fine, Ashtail."

The ShadowClan deputy's shoulders loosened under Gingershadow's touch, but there was a guarded glint in his sky-blue eyes. "I'll come with you, then." Ashtail brought up the rear, and Snowtuft was acutely conscious of his gaze boring into Snowtuft, as if daring him to attack the kits or run away.

Before they reached the nursery, Snowtuft could already hear the wailing of hungry kits. Gingershadow's ears pricked and her pace quickened. "Coming, kits!" She called. Snowtuft felt a prick of annoyance. *I don't remember you being so attentive to Frostwing and me when we were kits!*

As if on cue, a memory resurfaced from the back of his head...

"I'm hungry!" Snowkit wailed, feeling nothing but an empty stomach. Frostkit was silent, letting out small whimpers of hunger as she pressed closer to Coldheart. "It's alright, Snowkit. She will be back soon," Coldheart rumbled, his deep voice soothing.

Frostkit blinked up at the long-furred silver tom. "Where has she gone?" The white she-kit whispered. "Hunting. She can't be cooped in the nursery for so long, can she?" Coldheart licked the top of her head, his ice-blue eyes soft with affection.

Snowkit batted his father's white-tipped tail. "Can you teach us some fighting moves? I heard that you're the best fighter!" He stared imploringly into Coldheart's eyes. The big tom sighed. "Really, Snowkit? You're barely a moon old!" Fondness shone in the depths of his ice-blue eyes.

At that moment, a familiar scent wafted into their nostrils. "Gingershadow!" Frostkit squeaked, sitting up straighter. True enough, the dark ginger she-cat entered the nursery, something big and furry dangling from her jaws.

Snowkit scampered forward, his mouth watering. "Can we feed now?" "Be patient, Snowkit! Stop being so greedy." Irritation flashed in

Gingershadow's amber eyes and Snowkit's shoulders slumped.

Coldheart padded over. "That's a good fat squirrel," he remarked. "Did you catch it?" "Sort of. Ashtail and I worked together as a team." Gingershadow's voice was full of pride.

Coldheart stilled. "That's great. I'm glad that you brought food for the Clan." His smile looked forced, but Gingershadow didn't seem to notice. "Thanks," she purred, running her tail down his spine.

"Mother, I'm starving!" Frostkit wailed again. "Okay, my dear daughter." Gingershadow set the squirrel down next to her and lay on her side, exposing her belly. With a happy squeal, Frostkit latched on, suckling eagerly. Snowkit bounded over as well, but he had only just filled his mouth with warm milk when Frostkit nudged him, dislodging Snowkit from his place. Snowkit tumbled away, glaring at the white she-kit indignantly. "She pushed me!"

"Well, come back in, then." Gingershadow's tail flicked Snowkit's shoulder.

A new figure pushed into the nursery. "Ashtail, you're here! Come, let's share this squirrel." Gingershadow welcomed the dark gray tabby tom enthusiastically. "Sure," Ashtail grunted, his gaze flicking to Coldheart, who was standing rigid by the entrance. "Mudstar wants you," he told the silver-furred tom.

"Very well." Coldheart crossed the nursery in two strides and touched his nose to Snowkit and Frostkit's forehead.He looked like he wanted to do the same with Gingershadow, but the dark ginger she-cat was already tearing into the squirrel.

"I'll see you soon!" Was all the ShadowClan deputy meowed before he exited the nursery, the white tip of his tail drooping. But Snowkit was too busy feeding to notice the warmth Gingershadow displayed toward Ashtail, much more caring than to Coldheart.

When his memory had ended, Snowtuft was staring at the four kits suckling at Gingershadow's belly, and the love in the dark ginger she-cat's amber eyes made him flinch.

39 (NOW)

"Oh, look who it is." The mew made Snowtuft freeze in his tracks. *Oh, it can't be...*

But it was. Ashfur padded out from the bracken with an orange-and-white tom and another stocky light brown tabby tom, both of their eyes blank. And Ashfur's mouth was set in a grin of triumph.

Seeing the pale gray tom, Snowtuft flattened his ears. "What do you want?" he demanded, sliding out his claws. "Oh, we captured a living cat- one whom you were probably working for as a distraction. Would you like to know who?" Ashfur's eyes rounded innocently.

Snowtuft felt his heart quicken. "Rootspring," he growled, his back arching. *Of course Ashfur captured him!* "So you seem to know him very well." The flecked tom continued, a dangerous edge creeping into his tone.

Fox dung. Snowtuft could very easily guess what Ashfur did to those that betrayed him. "I know him. But I am not friends with him, nor allies. So what do you want from me, Ashfur?" Snowtuft forced his fur flat.

"So you two aren't allies? Then who are you allied with?" The flecked gray tom questioned. Is there even a choice? Snowtuft gritted his teeth. "The Dark Forest." "And I am the ruler of the Dark Forest right now. So your loyalty belongs to be, yes?" Ashfur tipped his head to one side like a young apprentice asking his mentor a question.

Oh, I really hope I can wriggle my way out of this! "That's logically true," Snowtuft admitted, lowering his gaze to his paws. "Good. Then come with us. By the way, this is Stemleaf and Sandynose." Ashfur began leading the way, and Snowtuft had no choice but to follow. Stemleaf and Sandynose walked by his side, their gazes straight ahead. However, Snowtuft knew that if he put a paw out of

line, the two toms would not hesitate to alert Ashfur.

I could distract Ashfur! The idea occurred to Snowtuft almost immediately. He observed Ashfur's rigid posture and knew that if he somehow made the pale gray warrior lose his concentration, Stemleaf and Sandynose would break free of his control. But it included risking his own life, and Snowtuft treasured whatever time he had as a spirit in the Dark Forest.

Gradually, the island came into view. Darkstripe was not on duty, and Ashfur simply led the other three toms into the small patch of land. Countless cats were already gathered in the centre, waiting for the flecked tom to arrive. Snowtuft shuddered at the eagerness glimmering in their eyes. *What kind of cat wants to see Ashfur? They all have thistledown for brains!*

"Cats of the Dark Forest!" Ashfur's yowl brought all chatter to a halt. "We have captured an enemy- and a new cat has sworn allegiance to me. And now, we shall have the two of them battle to the death to prove that this new cat is willing to prove his loyalty at all costs. Snowtuft, step forward."

Fight Rootspring to the death? Snowtuft's paws felt as if they were rooted to the mud. *What have I done?* A cat nudged his hindquarters sharply, and he forced himself to pad forward to stand beside Ashfur.

"Excellent." Ashfur's dark blue eyes glittered. "And now, please bring the prisoner in."

Four cats came forward. Mapleshade was in the lead, her chin lifted. On the two sides was Thistleclaw, a smug look on his face and Darkstripe, his dark gray tabby pelt sodden. And in the centre, with a defiant look on his face but his pelt bloody and ragged, was Rootspring. *Rootspring!* Snowtuft wanted to run to his friend's side and bring him to safety. But there was no safety in the Dark Forest, no matter where they escaped. Despair threatened to overwhelm him.

"Warriors, please shift so that they have sufficient room to fight. During the fight, please do not attempt to aid either Snowtuft or

Rootspring. You may cheer for them, but nothing else. And now... the battle begins!" Cats moved until there was a tiny clearing and Snowtuft and Rootspring were staring at each other.

Rootspring's sky-blue eyes were filled with shock, betrayal. *I'm sorry!* Snowtuft pressed his belly against the ground and began stalk forward, flattening his ears. Rootspring backed away, but Snowtuft saw his claws slide out. *I really don't want this, Rootspring!*

Taking a deep breath, he leaped into the air. Rootspring dodged to the side, but Snowtuft's hind paw lashed out and jabbed the yellow tom hard on the side. Rootspring stumbled, his gaze lit with pain.

As Snowtuft began circling the yellow warrior, Rootspring dropped into a crouch, pressing his belly against the muddy ground. His pelt rippled as his eyes narrowed, focusing on Snowtuft. The watching cats shifted impatiently, but no sound came from them.

From the corner of his eye, Snowtuft saw Ashfur lash his tail. "Get on with it, you mangy white coward!" The pale gray tom yowled. Fury sparked a light in Snowtuft's heart. How dare you call me a coward!

Snowtuft glanced at Ashfur, whose dark blue gaze was full of rage. He flicked his tail at the spirit cats, and their pelts spiked. Their ears flattened, and tails bushed around the clearing.

"Kill him!" "Slit his throat!" "Rip him into shreds!" Despite knowing that they were cheering for him, Snowtuft felt no gratefulness. *I didn't have a choice!*

He slid into an attack crouch, regret tugging at his gut when Rootspring's eyes widened with panic. You have more loyalty than I ever had, Rootspring. I'm sorry to harm you when you would never harm me.

"Claw his pelt off!" "Rip his ears!"

Closing his eyes briefly, Snowtuft lunged at Rootspring and held him down, drawing bloody claws marks along the yellow tom's spine. Rootspring let out a pained growl, kicking wildly and

managing to free himself.

Under Ashfur's watchful gaze, Snowtuft threw Rootspring to the ground, his heart cracking at the agony he knew Rootspring must be suffering. *I have to end this, don't I?* He tried to steer himself away from guilt as he tightened his claws around Rootspring's throat.

Is this enough? Perhaps Ashfur would change his mind. Snowtuft lifted his gaze to meet Ashfur's cold dark blue eyes. The pale gray tom looked crazed with bloodlust. Spittle dripped from his mouth, splashing into the earth. "Kill him."

Well, that was useless. As the Dark Forest cats screeched in excitement, Snowtuft curled his claws into Rootspring's throat. *Just imagine that he is Ashfur, then all will be over...* He could picture Rootspring's blood-streaked dead body lying here already...

To his utter surprise, Rootspring's hind paws heaved Snowtuft away. Snowtuft blinked, amazed by the warrior's endurance. Rootspring scrambled to his paws, but Snowtuft was already in his attack crouch, muscles bunched to strike faster than a hawk. He caught Rootspring's eye, then let his eyes flick to his neck. Let him be prepared for me.

Seeing Rootspring's eyes narrow, Snowtuft leaped, aiming for his throat. Rootspring ducked underneath Snowtuft, slamming his head forcefully into Snowtuft's chest and thrusting upward with a grunt of effort. *Good one.* Snowtuft staggered, and Rootspring hooked his claws into Snowtuft's pelt, hauling him to the ground.

"Get up, you mouse-brain!" Snowtuft heard Ashfur yowl. The watching cats hissed, and a yowl rose above the others. "Rip his pelt off!" Were the cats still cheering for him? Snowtuft felt Rootspring stiffen as more yowls sounded. "Finish him!"

Snowtuft felt Rootspring's grip slacken, and tore free of the yellow warrior's grip, springing to his paws and lunging again at him. Rootspring reacted quickly; he reared up and lashed out. His swipes battered Snowtuft's ears, and Snowtuft raked his claws across the living cat's jaw. *At least he's fighting back now.*

Snowtuft's next blow missed. To his surprise, Rootspring had dropped onto his belly and was already rolling over, hooking his claws into Snowtuft's shouders and churning his claws at his spine. Pain seared Snowtuft's spine and he twisted free with a shriek, immediately hurling himself at Rootspring and throwing Rootspring off balance.

Rootspring let out a grunt as Snowtuft slammed into him, then rolled and used his claws to drag himself along the ground. Snowtuft slashed the yellow tom's flank, watching blood rise in its trail.

Without warning, Rootspring shook himself free and raked his claws across Snowtuft's muzzle. The strength behind the blow startled Snowtuft. *And I'd thought that Rootspring was already half-dead!*

Rootspring flung himself at Snowtuft, and he staggered backward. Before he could recover, Rootspring knocked his paws from beneath him quickly, and Snowtuft landed with a smack against the mud. Snowtuft could feel Rootspring trembling with the effort as the yellow tom pinned his shoulders to the ground.

Is he going to kill me? Fear began to rise in Snowtuft's belly and his gaze locked with Rootspring's. He could read the dilemma there, the indecision. But it wasn't Rootspring that wouldn't let him go.

It's Ashfur.

"Can't you do anything right? One of you, kill him!" Ashfur commanded the Dark Forest cats. At once, panic flared in Rootspring's sky-blue eyes and he let Snowtuft wriggle free.

The horde of cats began to advance, and Snowtuft could hear Rootspring's breath quickening. But his wounds were stinging, and Snowtuft didn't want to die.

So he turned tail and ran.

40 (THEN)

"Ashtail, Hazelfang, Cedartail, Silkclaw, Bluefrost, Nightwisp, Cindersmoke, Frostwing, Brightpaw, Coldpaw and Snowtuft."

"Snowtuft?" Hazelfang gasped, staring at Mudstar. "You're bringing a traitor to a Gathering?" *I came back, didn't I?* Snowtuft thought bitterly, but held his tongue.

Mudstar met the dark gray-and-white she-cat's gaze steadily. "Perhaps by bringing Snowtuft to the Gathering, he will realise how important the Clans are. And I want him to confess to his wrong in front of all the Clans." At the black-and-brown tom's words, Snowtuft had to struggle to keep his shoulder fur flat.

Mudstar's yellow eyes flicked to him. "Any complaint, Snowtuft?" He questioned. Snowtuft gritted his teeth. "No, Mudstar. I know that what I did was wrong, and I have to repent. Thank you for letting me come to this Gathering."

On the way to the Gathering, Snowtuft trailed at the back, not listening to any of the friendly banter ahead. *Sometimes I really don't understand my own decisions... why I joined Batear, why I came back...*

"Why did you fight against ThunderClan?" An unexpected voice piped up. Startled, Snowtuft tensed but relaxed upon seeing Coldpaw. The white tom was staring at him, his pale blue eyes round and inquisitive.

Snowtuft tried to be warm towards the young apprentice, but his heart just wasn't into it. "Oh, I thought that Honeyshine told you to not talk to the traitor?" He let out a hollow laugh. Coldpaw's eyes never left his. "Yes, she did. But I want to know both sides of the story before I judge," the small tom meowed solemnly.

Snowtuft was taken back by Coldpaw's wisdom. *He has actual leadership quality... definitely a better leader than Mudstar.* "ThunderClan killed Slatepetal- my mentor- before we had a real

chance to bond. I wanted to avenge that."

Coldpaw's eyes reflected the night sky as he dipped his head and padded away to join Brightpaw. Snowtuft was surprised to feel admiration for the apprentice who was not yet a warrior. *He will make a fine warrior, deputy and leader.*

But you won't see him do all that.

There it was. The voice, laying down his future in front of him. Snowtuft froze for a moment, staring at the four great oaks coming into view. *What do you mean?*

The voice did not reply.

***

"ThunderClan is recovering from what happened last moon, though we still grieve for the loss of Gingerstrike and Poppystream. As for the issue of a medicine cat, we are extremely grateful to ShadowClan for lending us Honeyshine, who is currently mentoring Breezepaw, who is obviously underage but our only option as a medicine-cat apprentice." Amberstar paused for a moment while cats cheered for both Honeyshine and a small stone-gray she-cat beside her.

Mudstar stepped forward. "On that note, ShadowClan is very sorry for what our warrior, Snowtuft, had done. He has requested to come back, and was imprisoned in camp for the whole moon."

Instantly, screeches of outrage rang around the hollow. "How can you let a traitor come into our midst again?" Violetwind yowled. Snowtuft's tail-tip twitched. I only wanted to avenge Slatepetal! He wanted to yowl.

Mudstar calmly waited for the noise to die down. "I know that it is shocking that we forgave him so easily. But I would like Snowtuft to stand up and tell the whole story, from the beginning to the end."

Now, it was his moment. There was absolute silence as Snowtuft slowly stood up from his corner to look at the countless eyes glaring at him. But words abandoned him. *Where do I start?*

"Greetings, cats of all Clans. I believe that Snowtuft has done no wrong in following what he wished to. And I am backed up by my entire group, who will support him to the end."

What in the name of StarClan? Snowtuft whirled around and found himself face-to-face with a very familiar tom.

Batear.

The black-and-white tom took one more step forward, his light green eyes fixed on the four leaders perched on the Great Rock, their hackles beginning to raise. "What are you doing here?" Oakstar of RiverClan snarled.

"I am welcoming my warrior back. Snowtuft, you do not know this, but a couple of cats from my group have been watching you in camp. We can all tell that you aren't happy there. So we are attacking the Clans once more... for you. Care to join?" Batear looked at Snowtuft, his light green eyes shining under the light of the moon. Already, wisps of cloud were drifting over it, and there was a murmuring below.

"I-" Snowtuft stammered. "Don't, Snowtuft! Are you going to betray us all again?" Frostwing yowled from beside Cindersmoke. The white she-cat stood up, her tail bushed.

"Oh, are you listening to your sister now? From what I know, she's the snake-heart that absorbs all the attention and steals your glory," Batear sneered. "Frostwing isn't my sister! Not anymore!" Snowtuft blurted.

Fleawhisker padded forward until he was directly in front of Snowtuft. "No she isn't. Remember your last words to Tearstone? My sister died to help you, and you said that Tearstone was your littermate. Not like your littermate, but your littermate. The two of you aren't bonded by blood, but by the memories you share. Do you really want to let Tearstone die in vain?" The gray-and-brown tom's eyes were round, pleading.

"Exactly. Besides, aren't we your best friends? Me, Fleawhisker, Ripclaw... Tearstone. It's harsh, but you don't have a real friend in

ShadowClan, do you? Just come and join us for this last fight." Shredtail called out. Snowtuft knew that the dark brown tom was right, and took a hesitant step forward. *What they said is true. My loyalty was never with ShadowClan after all.*

"That's right." Batear's light green eyes glowed with delight. "You see, Mudstar? Your warrior has always been with us."

"Now... attack!"

Snowtuft descended together with his new Clan. *Now I don't have to decide between which group I belong to. Because I was right... Batear's group understands me.*

41 (NOW)

It was only when Snowtuft had left the island did he look back. Everything was still a turmoil, but he saw some spirit cats beginning to run away, their eyes wide with fear. Not blank anymore, but clear. His heart rose. *Did they break Ashfur's control?*

But then, more pelts swooped in. Tearstone grabbed a gray-and-white tom's tail between her teeth and hauled him back. A dark gray she-cat darted into the shadows only to be struck by a burly tom unknown to Snowtuft. He dragged the she-cat backwards by her scruff, and she didn't even resist. Slowly, the Dark Forest warriors herded all the spirit cats away. Snowtuft watched them, hollow with despair. There seemed to be no future for the living cats.

But Snowtuft saw something from the corner of his eye. Bristlefrost and Rootspring were hurrying from the clearing, an orange-and-white tom trailing after them. *Stemleaf! It seems like they know each other.*

Mapleshade's head jerked towards the three cats and pelted after them. Snowtuft held his breath as the tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat began to gain speed, her eyes fixed on Stemleaf's tail. But the warrior's paw caught on a root, and Mapleshade's amber eyes lit with satisfaction as she leaped, flinging her paws toward Stemleaf and bringing him down, rolling him with her.

Fight, Stemleaf! Snowtuft found himself urging the warrior. But Mapleshade held the struggling tom down easily and slashed his chest with one paw. Stemleaf's leaf-green eyes widened with shock as he fell limp beneath her paws.

The abduction was quick and smooth, so that Bristlefrost and Rootspring hadn't even noticed that Stemleaf was gone. *Wait. Where is Shadowsight?* The small dark gray tabby tom was nowhere to be seen in the small team.

And he saw it. Shadowsight was pressed against the bark of a tree, his amber eyes wide with fear. Ashfur loomed over the medicine cat, his face twitching as though he could barely control his rage. The pale gray tom grabbed Shadowsight and flung him against the tree. The younger tom hit the trunk with a loud thud and slid down among its roots.

Just as Snowtuft was about to spring to his paws and run to Shadowsight, a yellow flash of fur barrelled into Ashfur and knocked him off his paws. Rootspring had come back, and Snowtuft saw Bristlefrost haring into the deeper woods where the spirits cats were.

Snowtuft's paws moved without needing the signal from his brain. He only knew two things; one, that he cared for his friends and two, that going back would be suicide without any other help. As he raced back to the island toward Bristlefrost, he could see her lithe form fighting against the more powerful Mapleshade. Surprisingly, Bristlefrost seemed to be winning over the tortoiseshell she-cat.

But more danger was yet to come. As Snowtuft slowed, panting, he realised that Stemleaf was staring at Rootspring, who was guiding Shadowsight towards them. Snowtuft's blood seemed to freeze when he followed the orange-and-white tom's gaze and realised that Ashfur was standing motionless, his gaze dark and his body stiff. *Oh no... he's taking them back under his control!*

Fear left the spirit cats' eyes. Their pelts smoothed; their ears pricked. In one fluid motion, they turned and headed into the forest. Snowtuft glanced once again at Stemleaf. The warrior seemed to be struggling; he turned and croaked, "Get away from here. I can't promise I won't hurt you."

Sensible cats would obey the orange-and-white tom's advice. But evidently, Stemleaf was more to Bristlefrost than an acquaintance. "Fight it!" The pale gray she-cat urged him, desperation in her tone. "I'm trying." Stemleaf was trembling with effort, but in the end, his eyes clouded over fully.

Snowtuft's heart ached for Bristlefrost when Stemleaf glowered at the thick-furred she-cat. "You shouldn't have come here." He bared

his teeth at the pale gray she-cat, who scrambled away toward Rootspring. But it was a poorly thought move. As they clustered together, Snowtuft was acutely aware of the fact that they were cornered; Dark Forest warriors were beginning to advance on the three cats. And Shadowsight's amber eyes were glazed; the medicine cat was definitely dazed from the tussle with Ashfur.

Ashfur was guiding the spirit cats into a tighter circle around Bristlefrost, Rootspring and Shadowsight. Soon, the three brave living cats would be overrun and killed. Run! Snowtuft yowled silently, then realised that they couldn't. Shadowsight still needed Rootspring for support, and both the other cats' pelts were streaked with blood, their shoulders drooping with weariness. *They can't do anything... or go anywhere.*

So it's up to you to save them. Ashfur is the key- all of these cats are mainly spirit cats under his control.

For the first time, the voice that had guided his paw steps to the Dark Forest was helping him save the Clans.

Snowtuft steadied his breath. Then, he streaked forward, barging past spirit cats that were too slow to react... and lunged at Ashfur, crashing into the flecked pale gray tom and slamming him against the tree.

He saw confusion and surprise ripple immediately through the spirit cats, and reared up, lashing out at Ashfur with a yowl. "Run while you can!"

Ashfur batted him backwards. "Stop them!" He commanded. The Dark Forest warriors turned on the spirit cats once more as they began to flee, but that wasn't Snowtuft's concern anymore. All his focus was on the former StarClan warrior whose eyes were shining with hate.

Snowtuft sank his teeth into Ashfur's shoulder, but Ashfur kicked him away. "I knew that you would betray me!" The pale gray tom swung a blow at Snowtuft that sent him reeling. "Why would any cat follow you?" Snowtuft retorted, ducking the next swipe and lashing out with a swipe that tore Ashfur's nose.

"Because they know how to survive." Ashfur reared over Snowtuft and slammed one paw to his chest, pinning Snowtuft to the earth. No matter how much Snowtuft battered his hind paws against Ashfur's belly, the flecked tom would not budge. "Goodbye, traitor," Ashfur hissed into his ear raising one bloodstained paw.

Just before the blow landed, the voice rang in Snowtuft's head for one last time. *You aren't a traitor, Snowtuft... your sacrifice will not be in vain. Never.*

A sharp crack, and everything went black.

42 (THEN)

For the first time in history, Fourtrees was in chaos.

Snowtuft reared and swiped, not even caring who was victim to his powerful blows. His mind was a whirlwind, wondering who he should be aiming for. *Frostwing? Ashtail? Violetwind?*

If you kill Mudstar, then you'll be leader of ShadowClan.

Snowtuft couldn't help but recall his apprentice days, when Nightwisp had asked him about his ambition. The dark gray she-cat, together with Frostwing, had doubted his ability to lead. *That's it! If I kill Mudstar, I can end this... and become ShadowClan's leader! It will be easy to defeat Ashtail... far too easily.*

The next problem was that finding the ShadowClan leader was tantamount to finding a needle in a haystack. In the darkness of the shrouded moon, every cat looked the same, and the scents could hardly be distinguished. Snowtuft would have to find Mudstar among countless pelts. *But I can do it. And I will.*

Whitefire's white pelt glowed in the darkness as he reared, slamming massive paws down on another cat, who let out a shriek of agony. Snowtuft recognised Fleawhisker's gray-and-brown pelt, and rushed forward to help his friend. *We have to avenge Tearstone together!*

Just as Whitefire reared up for the final blow, Snowtuft threw his whole weight into the white tom, snapping his teeth at Whitefire's neck. Fleawhisker leapt to his paws , swinging blow after blow at the ThunderClan warrior's muzzle.

Whitefire's orange eyes widened with panic and he let out a yelp of terror, ducking to avoid the swipes from the two cats. Claws raked Snowtuft's chest as the white tom lashed out, but Fleawhisker sank his teeth into Whitefire's foreleg, bringing him down. The two toms wrestled on the ground in a whirl of paws and tails.

Snowtuft narrowed his eyes, trying to find the perfect moment to attack. As soon as Whitefire's back was turned, he rammed into the white tom, digging his claws into his neck. Whitefire choked, his paws flailing wildly. Fleawhisker darted in, and slashed his paws across Whitefire's belly, tearing a long gash.

Slowly, the life faded from Whitefire's orange eyes. The ThunderClan tom jerked once, then fell still. "Yes!" Fleawhisker hissed, his amber eyes glowing with satisfaction. "We did it."

Snowtuft gave Fleawhisker a curt nod. *I have to find Mudstar now!* Through the mass of writhing pelts, Snowtuft guessed that the leaders would be in the centre, where the fighting was the thickest. He plunged into battle, while Fleawhisker raced off to help Ripclaw, who was pinned under Jaggedglow, a WindClan warrior.

As expected, Snowtuft found Mudstar quickly, locked in battle with Whisperear. The light gray-brown tom was fast, but Mudstar had the advantage of weight and strength. While Whisperear weaved around the black-and-brown tom, every blow Mudstar landed on him sent the former ThunderClan warrior reeling. Snowtuft couldn't help but feel amazed at the old leader's ability to fight well despite many bouts of sickness.

Now isn't the time to think about it! He scolded himself, and began to run forward just as Whisperear was struck down by a blow to the chest. He leaped, barrelling into Mudstar and rolling onto the ground with the ShadowClan leader.

Pinning Mudstar down, Snowtuft could feel the patched tom's chest heaving rapidly. "Snowtuft!" Mudstar panted, lashing out as his shoulder. Snowtuft flinched at the pain, and the brown-and-black tom wriggled out from under him, slippery as an eel.

Snowtuft and Mudstar reared up, swiping at each other. Mudstar's blows were well-aimed, but it was clear that the ShadowClan leader was tiring rapidly. Snowtuft's cheek and muzzle were stinging from the wounds, and his hind legs felt sore. *I need a new tactic!*

Without warning, Snowtuft dropped onto four paws, then rushed forward and headbutted Mudstar's chest. Surprise flashed in the old

cat's yellow eyes as he fell, landing on the ground with a thud that probably had taken all the breath out of him. Seizing the opportunity, Snowtuft grabbed Mudstar's shouders and forced him downwards.

Mudstar's yellow eyes widened, and he fell limp under Snowtuft's paws. Taken aback, Snowtuft loosened his grip. *Did I kill him already? Well, that was easy.*

Evidently not.

As soon as Snowtuft's back was turned, there was a black-and-white flash of fur. Snowtuft whipped around, his neck fur bristling.

Mudstar and Batear were fighting now. *Wait- didn't I kill Mudstar?* Snowtuft was thoroughly confused. But when Batear pinned Mudstar down, he glanced at Snowtuft briefly. "Never turn your back on an enemy who isn't dead!" The black-and-white tom called.

Mudstar was tricking me! Fury rushed through Snowtuft and he hurled himself forward at Mudstar once more, letting out a roar. "I'll finish this!" He flung blow after blow at the ShadowClan leader, while Batear swiped alongside him, pushing Mudstar backwards.

Snowtuft's legs got exhausted quickly, and he dropped onto four paws. Batear was still pushing Mudstar towards a tree, unaware of the absence of Snowtuft. Snowtuft watched, enthralled. Mudstar lashed out at Batear, who seemed impervious to any pain.

A sudden force crashed into Snowtuft, pinning him to the blood-soaked earth. Leaf-green eyes stared into his own, and claws dug into his throat. "Frostwing..." Snowtuft choked out. His former sister's eyes were filled with sorrow and grief. "I'm sorry, Snowtuft." She whispered.

"No!" From the corner of his eye, Snowtuft saw Batear fling Mudstar onto the tree trunk. The brown-and-black tom hit it at full force, and his neck twisted with a crack. Mudstar slumped against the tree, his yellow eyes dull. *Mudstar's dead!*

But Snowtuft wouldn't be taking over the leadership of

ShadowClan.

"Goodbye, Snowtuft." Frostwing's voice cracked as she leaned closer and sank her teeth into Snowtuft's neck.

Blinding pain. Then...

Epilogue

Frostwing padded behind Ashtail, her tail drooping behind her. They had won the battle shortly after Snowtuft was killed.

Shortly after I killed Snowtuft.

She glanced at her paws, wincing at the sight of how blood-splattered they were. The warriors of ShadowClan were rejoicing, but Frostwing couldn't feel any triumph. *What is there to be proud of, when you killed your own brother? Even if he was a bloodthirsty traitor...*

"Hey. Frostwing, are you alright?" A nose touched her ear gently. Frostwing blinked, lifting her eyes to meet Cindersmoke's loving gaze. "I'm fine," she denied. "No, you aren't. I saw you kill Snowtuft, but that's okay. If you hadn't done that, we might still be fighting now." Cindersmoke tried to comfort her.

Frostwing sighed heavily. "I'm not so sure about that. Some other cat could have killed him." Upon hearing her words, Cindersmoke stiffened. "And what would have happened to you? He would have killed you instead... and our kits." His tail traced her spine, and Frostwing felt something in her belly stirring.

"How did you know?" *I had been planning to reveal it after the Gathering as a surprise!* But Cindersmoke just laughed. "I don't know. It was just a guess. But it's kind of obvious now."

Her heart lifting a little, Frostwing rested her head against the pale gray tabby tom's shoulder, letting out a small purr. *Everything's going to be alright. Ashtail will be leader, and I know that he will be a great one. I will nurse my kits alongside with Gingershadow, my caring mother.*

She gazed at her flanks, bulging slightly. Somehow, Frostwing just knew that there would be one kit only.

And your name shall be Snowkit. I couldn't shape my brother's future, but I will shape yours... Snowkit.

*****

Snowtuft blinked. Above him, the sun shone brightly through the treetops. "I'm in StarClan?" He choked out, shocked. *I thought that I would be in the Dark Forest for sure!*

"Yes and no. But I'm afraid that there's no time for sightseeing. Some cats would like to see you." A magnificent tom stepped out, his long fur glossy and dotted with stars. "Coldheart?" Snowtuft gasped in awe, darting forward to press his chin against the silver tom's chest.

Coldheart licked him between the ears, though Snowtuft glimpsed a shadow of sadness in his ice-blue eyes. "Yes, my son. Come, follow me." He led the way through the trees, where four cats were waiting. The stony look on their faces was enough to let Snowtuft shrink away from Coldheart.

The first cat was a sleek black she-cat with dark green eyes. "Welcome, Snowtuft. I can smell your fear about this trial. But you should be thankful that you were given this chance to be judged before StarClan decides your fate. Few are given this opportunity."

Snowtuft bowed his head. "Uh... thanks?"

"My name is Shadowstar." The black she-cat continued as if Snowtuft had not spoken. "And this is Gray Wing of WindClan, Leopardleap of ThunderClan and Riverstar of ShadowClan." A dark gray tom and the silver tom dipped their heads, but Leopardleap remained still. "You may sit down while we review your life."

Gray Wing spoke first. "Snowtuft, you started as an apprentice who lived a lot in fear after your father's death when you were two moons old. Can you explain why?" "I... Well, I felt that Coldheart died because of me. I was too adventurous at that time. After his death, I understood how much more important it was to be safe." Snowtuft didn't know what else to say.

To his relief, none of the StarClan cats pressed him. "It shows that there seem to be mysterious interferences that guided your path. Interferences that are not from StarClan," Riverstar observed. "Yes. The path of moonlight that guided me to Batear... and the voice." Snowtuft swallowed. "A voice, hmm?" Riverstar looked thoughtful.

"Then your alliance with Batear because you felt that ShadowClan... wronged you?" Shadowstar sounded skeptical. "Not like that. I just felt that I was neglected... that no cat understood me." Snowtuft defended himself.

"In your credit, Snowtuft, you were pretty neglected as a kit. Gingershadow never did pay a lot of attention, did she?" Gray Wing's voice was kind, and Snowtuft relaxed a little. "Yes. And... Slatepetal was pretty harsh on me until the very end, when I saw how much she really cared." The memory of his former mentor was painful. *If Gray Wing can understand me, perhaps the others can too... and I'll finally get to talk to her again...*

"And when ThunderClan attacked you and Gingerstrike killed Slatepetal, you chose to kill the already severely injured me." So far, Leopardleap had not spoken. But now, the spotted yellow she-cat's green eyes blazed.

"Leopardleap, I'm sorry about that. But I was really grief-stricken by the loss of my mentor... can you understand that?" Snowtuft pleaded. The fact that he had to beg to the ThunderClan she-cat made him seethe inwardly. *Why was Leopardleap chosen in the first place?*

Leopardleap said nothing more, just narrowed her eyes. Riverstar continued, evidently noticing the tension between the two cats. "And afterwards, you rejoined ShadowClan... only to betray them again only just now. Why?"

"Batear's reasons were all true. I wasn't happy in ShadowClan, and I... I guess I wanted leadership, for cats to respect me." Snowtuft's answer was simple, but the only one he could think of. Shadowstar's dark green eyes were slits. "So because of your heartache and ambition, you killed... lets see... Leopardleap, Gingerstrike, Cherrycloud, Whitefire and Mudstar."

"A Clan leader that StarClan blessed," Leopardleap added, her tail lashing. "Calm down," Gray Wing warned the spotted she-cat, who subsided a little.

"Snowtuft, you may leave while we discuss in private. Use your time wisely," the dark gray tom dismissed him. As Snowtuft stood up, he saw sympathy flash in Riverstar's emerald green eyes. *I really hope I can get into StarClan!*

Coldheart was already there, waiting for Snowtuft. "Did I do okay?" Snowtuft inquired, his heart full of anxiety.

The silver-furred tom didn't meet his eyes. "That's for the officials to decide." He led Snowtuft away, to another sunlit clearing. There, a familiar spotted she-cat was grooming her pelt with strong licks of her tongue.

"Slatepetal!" All worry vanished immediately as Snowtuft bounded forward to greet his former mentor. "Snowtuft?" Slatepetal blinked in astonishment, then scrambled to her paws and touched her nose to his. "Are you in StarClan now?" She glanced at Coldheart.

"No. They're still deciding." If his mind hadn't been so occupied, Snowtuft would have noticed the lack of a 'not yet' in Coldheart's words. But now, all he did was chat with the spotted gray she-cat.

"Slatepetal, I avenged you. I'm a good fighter and hunter now! Are you proud of me?" Snowtuft stared at Slatepetal the way a kit stares at its mother. To his dismay, the spotted ShadowClan warrior sighed. "Snowtuft, the thing about being a warrior... it isn't about revenge. It's about how you can serve your Clan the best."

"I did!" Snowtuft protested. "Did you?" Slatepetal's white ears twitched. Snowtuft recalled fighting against his Clanmates twice, and guilt swept over him. *I guess not.* He sat down with a bump, staring at his paws. "So you're not proud of me?"

At that moment, Shadowstar's head poked out of the foilage. "Snowtuft, we're waiting for you." "Okay." Snowtuft heaved himself to his paws. Just before he entered the clearing once more, Slatepetal responded. "Snowtuft... I was always proud of you."

His joy was short-lived, to say the least.

The four cats didn't even waste time on saying their greetings. Gray Wing and Riverstar's face showed the same pity, while Leopardleap just looked annoyed. "You failed," the spotted yellow she-cat told him bluntly.

Shadowstar shot her a look. "We're sorry, Snowtuft. But even though you show remorse, it is not enough to cover the murders of five noble cats. Coldheart will pass your goodbyes to your loved ones."

No... no! Snowtuft wanted to call after the four cats, but he knew that there was no way to change their minds. He turned to the silver tom, burying his face in Coldheart's fur. "I'm sorry! I disappointed you... and Slatepetal too. Tell her I'm sorry..." he breathed.

Coldheart wrapped his tail around Snowtuft's shoulders. "You know, life is always unexpected. Had I not asked Gingershadow to be my mate, you and Frostwing would have had another father- Ashtail, or rather, Ashstar. I was blind to see that she only had eyes for Ashstar, and only thought of me as a powerful deputy and a good choice as a mate. She never did love me, Snowtuft. I wish I'd known that earlier. But we cannot change the decisions we made. Nor will we question them. You just have to fix your mistakes, get rid of your regret."

"How?" Snowtuft gazed into those ice-blue eyes that held only love and no anger.

"Even StarClan does not know. But in the future... make a sacrifice."

As the world darkened around Snowtuft, and the Dark Forest materialised in front of his eyes, Snowtuft breathed in the fading scent of his father.

Yes, I will make a sacrifice. It will be Snowtuft's Sacrifice.